

Carrying the Weight of the World
Matthew 11:25-30
August 29, 2021
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Did you all get to watch much of the Olympics this year? I was able to catch a good part of them and was continually fascinated by the athleticism of everyone competing. Imagine the amount of discipline and hard work it takes to become one of the most elite athletes in the world. Actually, I can relate. I've wholeheartedly dedicated myself to my craft, so if nerdy wordplay ever becomes an Olympic sport, I hope to show my mettle by not meddling around and winning a medal. Stuck the dismount!

One of the most impressive group of athletes are the weightlifters. For example, I want you to meet Shane Hamman. Shane is a 32-year-old weightlifter from Oklahoma City who competed in the Olympics. Shane has been lifting weights since he was 9 years old. A 9-year-old weightlifter – think anybody tried to steal his lunch money?

Shane has grown a bit since he was nine – listen to these numbers. He weighs 344 pounds. He has a 22-inch neck, 22-inch biceps, and 22-inch calves. My waist is 36 inches – his thighs are 36 inches! His waist is 47 inches, and his chest is 62 inches. That means his chest is 5-foot-2 inches around. When asked in an interview what he eats, Shane said, “Whatever I see.” In the Olympics, in two lifts, Shane lifted 947 pounds.

Have you ever lifted 947 pounds? I doubt you have literally, but metaphorically, sometimes it feels like we're carrying that kind of weight, doesn't it? I could go through the litany of things that weigh us down these days, but honestly, it would just be too depressing. So many times in the past year when I've been talking with friends or colleagues, we've said, “Life feels heavy.” Heavy with worry and fear. Heavy with making tough decisions. Heavy with conflict and divisiveness. Life feels heavy.

That's why this invitation from Jesus in Matthew's passage sounds so appealing. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” This passage is one of the most beloved in the Bible because we all need to hear it. We all have burdens and we all need rest. We simply can't go on and on and on without taking a rest like the one offered here. If you try to live life by only inhaling, you won't make it very far. You have to take time to exhale, too.

In the early days of automobiles, it was common for eating and drinking places to be built on the tops of long hills. These locations were for the convenience of people who needed to stop and let their overheated radiators cool down. That is what this passage speaks about to so many of us, a time for rest and refreshment when we can let our overheated radiators cool down. There is nothing quite like coming to the Lord and setting aside our burdens for a while, nothing quite like having our batteries recharged, our radiators cooled down and our spirits lifted.

I saw a meme that someone posted on Facebook this past week. It said, “What I would do if I was stranded on a desert island right now,” and it showed a picture of a beach with these words written in the sand: “Don't send help.” Sometimes it feels good to just get away from it all, doesn't it? Yes, it does, be that's not actually what Jesus is offering here.

This passage comes in the midst of Jesus' ongoing verbal boxing match with the Pharisees, who repeatedly try to brand him as a law-breaker. In turn, he criticized them for focusing too much on obedience to the law and missing the bigger picture. For example, Jesus heals someone and the Pharisees ping him for doing it on the Sabbath, missing the bigger picture

of what Jesus was all about. They were so focused on slavish obedience and trivial transgressions that they don't see the fulfillment of the law right in front of them.

As religious leaders, the Pharisees passed their legalistic view of faith onto their followers. For them, you had to follow the law perfectly or else you were saddled with the penalty of your transgression. In Matt. 23 Jesus says about the Pharisees: "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others." The people who heard Jesus' invitation were not burdened with work or responsibilities, they were burdened by the law, burdened with a faith dictated by obligations and requiring the impossible. So, Jesus offers an invitation to a different way of life, a different way of faith. Not a faith that burdens and breaks, but a faith that refreshes and renews. That is the rest Jesus offers, a rest from trying and trying and trying.

Fast-forward to today. We are no longer burdened by the obligation to perfectly obey the law. We are no longer weary from trying to follow every "thou shalt not" in the Hebrew scriptures. Lucky us, right? Then we are we still so tired? Why do we still feel like we are carrying heavy burdens? Because we are. Not necessarily burdens imposed upon us, although that is sometimes true, but more likely burdens placed upon us by society or burdens we put on ourselves. Life is heavy.

So what kind of rest is Jesus offering us from these burdens? I can tell you what Jesus is NOT offering. Jesus is NOT offering the rest of inactivity. He's not saying, "You deserve a break. Come and kick back and relax with me." Jesus is not offering us a luxurious vacation or a day at the spa. He's not offering us an escape from life; he's offering us a different way of dealing with life. Whether it's the burden of following the law, the burden of making ends meet or the burden of trying to know the right thing to do, we have burdens. Even Jesus knows there's no such thing as a burden-free life. The issue is not if we shall be burdened, but with what we shall be burdened and how we will bear those burdens.

That gets us to the second part of Jesus' invitation, which can seem contradictory to the first. Come and find rest...by taking up this yoke! That's like the scene in the movie "Raising Arizona" where the bumbling bank robber says, "Freeze! Everyone get down on the floor!" and the customer says, "Well, which one is it? Do you want me to freeze or do you want me to get down on the floor?" Which one is it, Jesus? Do you want us to rest or do you want us to take up this yoke? Our earthly logic tells us that a burden is still a burden, no matter how much the seller tries to spin it as "light" and "easy."

The key to understanding this part of the invitation is the concept of the yoke. A yoke was a piece of wood that joined together two oxen to make a team for pulling a plow or a wagon. The Greek word Jesus uses for "easy" also means "well-fitting." As a carpenter, Jesus would have made a lot of yokes in his day. The ox was brought to the shop, and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then roughed out, and the ox was brought back to have the yoke tried on. The yoke was carefully adjusted so that it would fit well and wouldn't chafe and rub the ox's neck. The yoke was tailor-made to fit the ox.

Jesus knows what burdens us: our anxieties and our fears, our temptations and our responsibilities, our failures and our guilt. And he offers here to lift our heavy burdens and replace them. He offers to take off the yoke of obligation that sits ill-fitting on our shoulders and instead replace it with his easy yoke. But what makes Jesus' yoke easier than the ones we already are burdened with?

A farmer is standing on the side of the road next to his wagon, which is stuck in a ditch. The farmer hitches his tired, old horse to the wagon and says, "Hiya, Betsy!" and the horse

doesn't move. Then the farmer says, "Giddyup, Chestnut!" and the horse doesn't move. Then the farmer yells, "C'mon, Sally!" and the horse doesn't move. Finally the farmer says, "Let's go, Ranger!" and the horse finally moves forward, slowly dragging the wagon out of the ditch. An observer says to the farmer, "Why did you call all those names? Did you forget your horse's name?" The farmer says, "Nope. I know his name. Ol' Ranger is blind, and if he thought he was the only one pulling the wagon, he wouldn't even try."

We are not called to go through this heavy life alone. That's the amazing thing about this invitation from Jesus: a yoke is made for two. This yoke is not one that Jesus imposes upon us, but one that he wears with us. When Jesus offers us his yoke to carry, he's offering to become our yokemate, he's offering for us to learn how to bear the burden by working beside him. He's saying that the heaviness of life will seem lighter if we are willing to share it with him by worshipping him, spending time with him in prayer, reading his story, trusting him. With Jesus beside us, it transforms our understanding of the burdens we are carrying.

Jesus' promise is not that we'll find a good vacation with him, that we will be able to get away from it all, but rather that he will refresh our souls when we come into his presence, and that when we venture forth into the world again – with him beside us -- he will replace the burdens that destroy and exhaust us with a yoke that will be life affirming and easier to carry. We become stronger in our faith not by weighing down our life, but by sharing it with the one who walks beside us each step of our journey.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that we go through all this effort and guilt to prove we're worthy of the gracious gift we've been given, while all the time Jesus is standing right there in front of us, half of a shared yoke across his own shoulders, the other half wide open and waiting for us. I believe the only time the load of life becomes unbearable is when we try to take over and do all the lifting ourselves. You are not alone on this journey. We are here with you. Christ is here with you. Christ says to us, "You are mine. I have come for you. Now come to me. You don't have to do this alone."