

## Matthew 11

Today we reflect on the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew where Jesus wraps it all up by saying, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

I know these months have been the toughest of our lives. We are tired. We are weary. We are frustrated. We are carrying many burdens.

There is the burden of adapting over and over again as how we used to do things is not available to us and we are forced to find a new way. Families were one of the first ones to experience this when schools shut down and lessons were sent home. Parents had burdens of trying to work remotely while caring for children and leading them through lesson plans.

Businesses that were suddenly closed were also on the forefront of asking the question of how to survive. Left with few possibilities to function, the burden of lost paychecks and the peril of the owner’s investments is a huge burden. The questions linger, what will the future hold?

Essential businesses have the burdens of operating under changing recommendations and limitations. Employees of essential businesses find themselves on the front lines of exposure to a dangerous virus in the public square.

Residents everywhere are tiring of the length of the pandemic. People are getting weary of being trapped in their homes or apartments. Everyone struggles with the limitations of the times in some way or another.

People are missing the human interaction which is essential to life. It is burdensome to be isolated when we are so used to going where we want to when we want to.

But we are not alone. God is near. The body of Christ is alive. The word of God itself is full of grace.

Jesus beckons all who hear to run to him for the amendment of their life. Jesus promises that because of God's overall orientation to us, that God reaches out in love to us all the time, we can be assured that however faith changes us it will be done in a way that is not simply tolerable, but incredibly life giving. I say that because we don't always warm up to what needs to change. We hear Jesus implore us to undergo teaching, and we feel ill equipped to change. But we are not alone in the transformations ahead. We are simply following God's lead, guided by the Spirit, and supported with the body of Christ.

Knowing that God loves us no matter what, it is possible to respond to God in love. But the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew reminds us that people do not always respond with their whole heart and life. Jesus talks about whole cities who would not accept him, Chorazin and Bethsaida. When Jesus had accomplished his deeds of power in those cities, which meant the people there had allowed healings and cures to occur, they did not humble themselves and they did not open themselves to God and repent. We learn from this that Jesus can be rejected. They did not think they needed to love God with their whole heart, with their entire life.

But with a half-hearted response what they didn't realize was how easily the power of evil had crept into their lives. This is how evil works, the first thing you give into might not seem like much of anything, especially in the moment, but then it is easier for it to happen a second time, and then again. You have already made a deal, and you quickly get used to the small adjustment you made, even though you know it fudges on your ability to fully love God and your neighbor, you think it won't matter much in the overall picture. Before you know it, one small deal has become your way and your pattern. When our focus is away from God, you no longer know up from down, or how to even find our way back to God.

But we are not alone in this time of burdens and weariness. God is near. The body of Christ is alive. Jesus beckons us to come to him and in our following of him, learn from him and listen to his word. But learning and listening and following don't always sound like something life giving. Yet the gospel today states to be a follower of Christ is to learn to dance when children play the flute. To dance is to exhibit the joy of knowing Jesus. Is Jesus invitation about joy?

Rowan Williams, a theologian and pastor in the Church of England, reported on the joy that comes from following a teacher. It happened in Sydney, Australia. The story comes out of the Laura Hodgkinson Sunshine Home where people with developmental disabilities lived in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1980, a young dance teacher from Chile came and developed dance and drama for the people of the Sunshine Home to perform, the group being called *Stepping Out*.

The teacher gathered the young people in their 20's and 30's and they gradually learned controlled breathing and coordinated movement. They learned to relax in their bodies and live in them. They learned to dance to Villa-Lobos and Puccini.

Besides the dance instructor, costume designers also went to work, fitting each member with masks and costumes. Next, the music became more adventurous, the dancing more subtle. Then 31 year old Chris emerged as the natural soloist of the group, portraying the death of Madame Butterfly with total conviction. Williams wrote, "You watched the awkward, superficial, lumpy, and vacant face of the developmentally disabled man turn into a tragic mask: every inch, every corner of the body answering the music with discipline, accuracy, complete engagement. And the result, a breathtaking performance in the Sydney Opera House, no less, was greeted with a standing ovation."

Williams admitted that anyone might have watched *Stepping Out* and been ready to be moved in a patronizing way watching the residents of the Sunshine Home trying to dance. Yet, the final response of the entire audience was not one of pity, but of totally being captivated and delighted, for they were watching grace and beauty in every sense. Williams wrote, "We'd been watching love, the patient, humorous, grave care of the teacher, getting these people to value and admire their bodies, giving words and hugs of encouragement to each one as they prepared to perform."

That is what it means for the Son to reveal the Father to children. To learn to dance to the flute means that we are so caught up in the dance our only desire becomes to share it with others. We no longer value distinctions and differences. Anyone can be part of the dance, and listen to the teacher, and be guided by love.

This is the rest that Jesus offers to all who are weary. The is the gentleness and humility of heart he offers to all. This is a great example of the blessedness of the Beatitudes.

We may stumble on a word that says we are to take on the yoke of Christ. We know how Jesus will suffer and die. We wonder what it means that we should take on his yoke and learn from him. Yet, we can because he bore for us the yoke that only he could bear. That Jesus did this, that he went to the cross, that God raised him from the dead, makes it possible for us to share in his life and this yoke, which is now easy. It is easy because his yoke, his teaching, his movement is a welcome alternative to the burdens we carry that give no rest.

As it turns out, to rest Jesus style is none other than to sit at his feet, to learn from his word, to be the body of Christ for one another and for the sake of the world. In this we find meaning, and belonging, and purpose, and because we have these things, we can rest in the life that is becoming our, more and more, each day.

In the past few weeks, we have been given a lesson on breathing that can help to re-focus us. We are invited to gather to pray, which helps us to give voice to our burdens, and provides an opportunity to listen for God's presence. We have been given a gracious word.

To read deeply the gospel of Matthew and see who Jesus is according to this author, it helps to read with an open mind and heart. Eugene Peterson, a pastor, author and theologian who opened up the scriptures to many with a modern translation of the scriptures known as *The Message*, said to "know" the Bible is less about me reading it, and more about having it read me." To have the scriptures read me is to let go of my assumptions, and instead ask questions. Sometimes this exposes uncomfortable truths about me, my life, my understanding of my own self-righteousness, my pride and my own perceived importance. To have the scriptures read me is to then be open to amending my life because the word has stood in stark contrast to the many unconscious ways I have become accustomed to.

Peterson says that loving the scripture becomes "loving the one who speaks the words enough to get them right." Love does that to us. When we are loved and

love in response, we become tuned into the one we love, and seek to please that one.

With this in mind, we may hear Jesus word in a new light, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”