

Burden Down, Yoke Up, and Learn
Psalm 145:8-14
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
July 9, 2017
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
Clemson, SC

Before coming to Fort Hill to serve as your Associate Pastor for Discipleship, my title at the presbytery was Associate Executive for **Vacations** and Education. I remember a time when George Wilkes introduced me as the Associate Executive for **Vacations** and Education. Everyone thought that would be a fun job. And it was! I often found myself encouraging pastors and church educators to take all of their vacation time because it was only a benefit if they would take it. When I read our gospel texts today and hear Jesus say, “Come unto me, . . . and I will give you rest,” my first thoughts were about vacation, but Jesus is also speaking about our vocation as he calls us into a relationship of discipleship with him.

Did you know that 54% of Americans who have paid vacation time do not take it? That means 658 million unused vacation days were left on the job last year. Workers’ main reasons were all about fear:

- 34 % fear getting behind on their work,
- 30% believe no one else at their company can do the work while they’re out,
- 22 % are completely dedicated to their company, and
- 21% feel they can never be disconnected.
- As workers shoulder a heavier work-load post-recession, others are afraid of not meeting goals.
- And 80% of employees said *if* they felt more support from their bosses, they would take more time off.ⁱ That’s a lot of fear.

Since 2006 the American Psychological Association has been surveying Stress in America. Stress has been going down for a decade, until now. The lead stressors in our lives are money, work, the economy, and the current political climate, with noted increases in safety, terrorism, and mass shootings and/or gun violence. Anticipated over the next several years are stressors of money, the economy, personal health concerns, and health problems affecting family. There is some good news that 4 out of 10 persons feel they are managing their stress better. Of the seven listed ways of managing stress, praying scored number 6. Exercise or walking scored in the number one slot.ⁱⁱ

The situation in Jesus’ time also points to burdens about money and economics as Jesus told a parable to the people about what they are like. He stages them in the marketplace and calls them children who show their immaturity by playing games, wanting John to dance like at a wedding and Jesus to mourn like at a funeral. But the people are not *children*, they are *adults*—adults who behave like children.

These *children* cannot tolerate that John’s conservative life limits his activity to the wilderness where he does not eat or drink as they do and surely is not sophisticated enough to dance at a wedding. And these *children* are ready to stone Jesus who will not play the mourning game, but instead liberally wines and dines with tax collectors and sinners. Nothing

will please adults who behave like children— who want to control and manipulate others. Jesus points out their lack of spiritual maturity to recognize that God’s amazing message of love comes to all people, not just those who can be controlled by the Pharisees. Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. Because Jesus is the divine Word, the Rabbi who will teach all things, he is the embodiment of wisdom and will have followers, those who will become his disciples, even the likes of you and me.

Jesus shows us the intimate relationship with his Abba Daddy by praying. We learn from Jesus that the Father reveals wisdom to infants—babes in the faith. Then Jesus declares the bond of intimacy he shares with the Father and that their closeness is revealed by the Son to anyone whom he chooses. This sounds somewhat exclusive, but the possibility of anyone gives all of us hope.

Jesus extends an invitation to all to come to Him and he will receive them, burdens and all, wearied and awake, all are welcome. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus. No burden is too heavy. No sin is too bad. No hurt is too deep. Jesus calls all who are overwhelmed with life, and every one of us is in some way. No matter what is causing you stress, unload your burden to Jesus. It sounds so easy, does it not? The only problem is that we find ourselves stuck in that prayer of confession from Paul’s words. *“I know the right thing to do, but I do exactly the opposite. And even now I try to blame the sin instead of taking responsibility myself. Save me, Lord from the sin I conceal within myself...”*

We are like those adults who behaved like children sitting in the marketplace, when we focus on the externals. Until we let go of the external stuff in our lives, the internal work is delayed. We want to keep our burdens. Some of us even find our identity in our burdens. Maybe you have seen or even used that new app to sell stuff you no longer need. It is called *Let Go!* It would be nice if there was an app for selling this kind of weighty stuff. I would name it *Burden, Down!* Are you carrying a yoke of oppression? *Burden, Down!* Do you have your own modern day Pharisees placing guilt upon you? *Burden, Down!* Are you choked by debt and anxiety? *Burden, Down!* Are you overworked or underpaid? *Burden, Down!* Are you afraid of a diagnosis or a test you might fail? *Burden, Down!* It sounds great, but no one wants to buy this burdensome stuff and no app can replace what Jesus does for us.

The thing about burdens is that we are afraid to let go of them because once we do, we are no longer in control of our lives. *And that is exactly why Jesus invites us to come to him.* He receives our burdens *with care for us.* He forgives us our burdens. Once we Burden Down with Jesus, we yield control of our lives to him, not as some puppet master, but as our Teacher.

The rest that Jesus offers us is more about our calling, our vocation, than our vacation. We find our rest, not in anything or anyone else, just in Jesus. This rest is a regular part of our life with Jesus, it is filled with praise of God and becomes a constant encouragement for living. This rest is what sustains and shapes our lives.

Jesus instructs us to “Take my yoke up.” Jesus does not let us off the hook without responsibility. Instead he shares his yoke with us, and his yoke is a less burdensome way of life. Rather than being weighed down by the Pharisees and the letter of the law, Jesus’ disciples would take his yoke up and find it easy to live by the Spirit of the law which is justice, mercy, faithfulness, and love. This yoke which is light then becomes what defines us, not our burdens. Jesus fits the yoke for us to wear so that we are with him, walking through life every day right beside him. With him it is easy.

In ancient Hebrew the first letter of the alphabet is aleph. (א) The original pictograph for this letter is a picture of an ox head (𐤀) representing strength and power from the work performed by the animal. This symbol also represents a chief or leader. When two oxen are yoked together for pulling a wagon or plow, one is the older and more experienced—one who leads the other. Within the clan, tribe or family the chief or father is seen as the elder who is yoked to the others as the leader and teacher.

Picture if you will Jesus the carpenter fashioning a yoke for two oxen to take up. One of those oxen is smaller than the other. In fact, the small one is so small that when it steps into place under the yoke, it feels nothing because the larger ox is bearing all the weight of the load. But together they move, they travel side by side as the smaller one grows stronger learning from its teacher. “Learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” *To learn gentleness and humility is the crowning task of discipleship and can only be learned while yoked to Jesus.*

St. Augustine wrote several sermons on this text. In one of them he gives us insight into how gentleness and humility are formed.

“Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me;” not to raise the fabric of the world, not to create all things visible and invisible, not in the world so created to work miracles and raise the dead; but, “that I am meek and lowly in heart.” You wish to be great, begin from the least. You are thinking to construct some mighty fabric in height; first, think of the foundation of humility. And how great soever a mass of building one may wish and design to place above it, the greater the building is to be, the deeper does he dig his foundation. The building in the course of its construction, rises up on high, but he who digs its foundation, must first go down very low. So then you see even a building is low before it is high, and the top is raised only after humiliation.ⁱⁱⁱ

Friends, let us learn gentleness and humility from the Teacher, the one who first came down low to earth to save us, to save us from ourselves. May we close with the Prayer of the Day by St. Augustine. While this prayer is often used at funerals, St. Augustine wrote it in his autobiography *The Confessions*. It summarizes his life and is his testimony of God’s interaction with a soul that has found its rest in its Creator. Let us pray it together now.

Almighty God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you: pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself, and so bring us at last to your heavenly city where we shall see you face to face; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.marketwatch.com/story/55-of-american-workers-dont-take-all-their-paid-vacation-2016-06-15>

The sad reason half of Americans don’t take all their paid vacation. Published: May 28, 2017 12:09 p.m. ET accessed July 8, 2017.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2016/coping-with-change.pdf> American Psychological Association’s report “Stress In America - 2017 Snapshot : Coping with Change.” Published 02.15.2017, accessed July 8, 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf106.vii.xxii.html?scrBook=Matt&scrCh=11&scrV=28#vii.xxii-p3.2> St. Augustine, Sermon on the Mount, Harmony of the Gospels, Homilies on the Gospels, Sermon XX, accessed July 7, 2017.