

Goal: That the hearers would more readily share Christ's yoke of burdens.

"Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" If you have ever had the privilege to stand beneath the Statue of Liberty in New York City, you would have seen these words of a poem by Emma Lazarus named **The New Colossus** inscribed on its base. For over one hundred years these words have called out to people from all nations—welcoming all, no matter who they are, to come to America.

This morning we hear some of the most comforting words our Lord ever spoke. ***"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*** (Matthew 11: 28 – 30)

What beautiful words from Jesus. We all want rest, don't we? Work, kids, house, school, church, family, it never seems to end. Even in retirement, many of you tell me, *"I'm busier now than I was when I worked."* Whether it's at work, at home, on the sports field, or even here working at church we get tired, stressed, and wearied.

I get tired. I know that might seem hard to believe, but I do. I get tired of too many things to do and of too many deadlines to meet. I get worn down by too many places to go and by too many problems to solve, or at least worry about. I am wearied by too many phone calls and too many doorbells and too many emails. I would love to just sit somewhere and let Jesus' invitation and promise flow over me like a refreshing waterfall. ***"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden...and you will find rest for your souls."*** (Matthew 11: 28ff) I don't even want to think about it. I just want the beauty and power of those words to penetrate and soothe.

Leslie Weatherhead made a guess as to the origin of Jesus' words. He pictures Jesus working in the carpenter shop long after his father Joseph is dead. One day, right at closing time, after the shavings had been swept and the door is ready to be locked, a farmer appears. He's leading an ox whose ill-fitting yoke has caused his shoulders to bleed. The farmer begs Jesus to give them some relief. Plowing needs to be done and the animal can't pull the plow in its present condition. The yoke needs to be planed. Jesus doesn't want to do it. The workday's been long enough already. Everything's put away.

He's hungry. His mother's expecting him. But the anguished look of the farmer and the bloodied back of the ox can't be ignored. The job of planing takes him a long time, but finally the yoke is smoothed. The grateful farmer returns home with a beast that will suffer no more while it does its work. Years later, Jesus looks out on a crowd, which seems every bit as bloodied as the farmer's ox. He sees people worn down by the burdens of life, a people tired. Jesus looks at them, stretches out his carpenter's hands and says: ***“Come to me...Take my yoke upon you...my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”***

I've always liked Weatherhead's idea for the background to Jesus' words. But after hearing our Gospel I started to wonder why the rest Jesus offers has to be connected to a yoke. Why, in Weatherhead's story, didn't Jesus tell the farmer to let the ox go free? It did its work. Why not let it pasture its remaining days at rest? Why did it need a yoke at all? My problem, of course, is not with oxen. It's with people. Why does our promise of rest have to be coupled with bearing a yoke? Why couldn't Jesus simply say, *“I will take from you all burdens and everything that causes burden?”* But Jesus isn't talking about rest, if rest means complete leisure or total inactivity. Rather, He's talking about refreshment, about zest for living, about a spring in the step that makes burdens lighter even as work goes on.

Awhile back, I received a phone call from a seminary friend who lives in Illinois. I was happy to hear from him because it had been months. But the conversation that followed wasn't pleasant. He told me his life and ministry were crumbling around him. Many families in the church were leaving because of the senior pastor's decisions. My friend would spend hours with members in their homes and found no solution because he was siding with them. It was now looking like the church could not support a multi-pastor staff and He was afraid that he would have to look for another call. Not only that but his wife was about to give birth and she had left her teaching job to care for the children. He had also lost over twenty pounds because he couldn't force himself to eat. Sleep came only in small increments. He'd go to bed at midnight, lie awake until 3:00, doze off for an hour or so, and then lie awake again until he got up at 5:00. Over an hour into the conversation, there was a moment of silence, and he let out a deep sigh. When I asked him what the sigh meant he said, *“I feel better now.”* Isn't that strange? His problems

were still there. I hadn't done anything but what a friend can do at a time like that. I gave him no advice and offered no answers. Yet he said, "*I feel better now,*" and he meant it.

What my friend had done was to let some of his burden go. His yoke had been planed by sharing some of the weight on his back. The load seemed more balanced. The rough places weren't quite as abrasive as before. When we finally said goodbye he also said, "*I think I can sleep now...I think I can rest.*" I didn't tell him that what had just happened, his letting go of the burden, was what Jesus meant. Nor did I tell him that when two people share a burden, so that one of them can walk a little lighter, it's the work of Jesus. Jesus' work is that of lifting burdens. He is the one active in our conversations, planing yokes and easing wounds. If a weight is lifted from someone's back it's not simply something that Jesus wants done. Giving rest is the work of Christ.

My friend had found relief from our conversation. But what became apparent later was that I had found relief too. Isn't that strange? I thought it was a difficult conversation. I was so deeply moved by the chaos of his life that, at times, all I could do was gasp. When I put the phone down I felt completely drained, yet I felt relief and I felt at rest. I had been doing what I was supposed to be doing as a Christian brother. I was allowing Christ to live through me and exercise His words, "***Take my yoke upon you.***"

My conversation that night wasn't all that much. Only 43 minutes on my cell plan. But in that conversation I found myself wearing the yoke of Jesus. I found myself being used by Jesus and sharing in His work of giving rest.

Whenever we allow Christ to live through us, we find that the burden is light. Whenever we find the yoke of Christ around our necks we realize the yoke is easy. Whenever we share in the work of God's lifting and healing we find that the burden is light and the yoke is easy because our lives yoked to Him and He lifts us.

There was a man who watched a hard-hat diver plunge again and again into the sea. Each time the diver was brought to the surface, the suit was dripping wet but inside, the man was dry, unharmed, and even seemed rested. The man who watched said, "*Wouldn't it be nice if we had something like that to get us through the waters of life?*" We do. It's called the yoke of Christ. It's what we were united to in Baptism. It's how He gives us rest at His table. It's what we live in each day by God's grace. It's a yoke by which our burdens are shared and by which we share in the life giving work of God.