

The Hidden & The Revealed
Roman 7: 15-25a; Matt 11: 16-19, 25-30

“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.” (Matt 11:28-30)

After the teachings we received from Jesus in the Book of Matthew these last few weeks, these are welcome words. So many of us are weary from isolation and adapting to social distancing. Many are mourning the struggles and the loss of our family and friends. So many in the world around us are weary from the burdens of fighting for access to timely testing and appropriate healthcare, or of the search for new employment after being laid off. The inability to comfort one another in a truly meaningful way is a loss. The inability to meet face-to-face, to embrace, to comfort and to console one another in person *is* a deep loss. The continuous monitoring, cleaning and waiting feel like a long trudge schlepping heavy backpacks.

“Come to me,” Jesus says. “Come to me ... and I will give you rest.”

The pandemic is slowing here in our home state, but it continues to surge across the South and West. Civil unrest has mostly quieted in the Pioneer Valley, but the struggle to understand the experiences of people of color and of the needs for constructive change persists. It is draining. There is a consistent weariness.

“Come to me, all you that are weary ... and I will give you rest.”

Jesus’ proclamation of rest is enticing. It is as enticing as it is confounding. The promise of rest in our following Jesus is an interesting juxtaposition to the call we heard over the last few weeks to embrace difficult work for the betterment of ourselves and our world. We heard about how Christ came not to bring peace, but a sword. He told us he was sending his followers out as sheep among wolves. Now, Jesus is saying the yoke of living the Way of Christ is easy; the burden is light. In typical Jesus fashion, he seems to be saying two different things.

So, let’s dig deeper. *We are* to take on the ministry of Jesus in a world not entirely welcoming in order to bring the Kingdom of God to fruition. In that work, Jesus will take on our burdens and the work will feel light.

This sounds like a description of satisfying, life-giving work. It is not the description of futile exertion, or onerous mind-numbing labor. It is not compulsory toil extracted out of fear of not fitting in or not achieving what everyone else has.

It is work done in joy motivated by love. It is labor motivated by a gentle and humble heart. Thought of in this way, when we come across something that ignites in us a desire for change, we might want to ask, “how can I bring joy to the situation or love to someone labelled unlovable?” Or, what is it that might make their burden easier and lighter?

It certainly wouldn't be by quoting our reading from Romans. Where Jesus shows us the Way of Christ, Paul sets out to explain where the rubber hits the road. His ministry is to the fledgling churches of the early Jesus movement who are trying to make sense of living in Christ when following Christ leaves them persecuted and excluded. The Church in Rome experienced a recent expulsion where many of their members were forced out of the city. There are growing tensions between the Jewish Christ followers and the Gentile Christ followers. The Gentile believers move more freely throughout the Empire; overall, they have more freedom in every sense. This is because they can "pass." If they don't proclaim their religious beliefs out loud, their ethnicity provides them cover. They can be accepted as upright Roman subjects and citizens. All they need to do is stay in the closet. The Jewish believers, however, already experience marginalization. They can practice the Jewish faith easily, but are subject to forced migration if they follow the crucified Christ. They do not have, and will never be, granted citizenship rights.

The community in Rome is concerned with the differences between the Jewish and the Gentile believers. They are concerned with how to follow Jesus in a changing world where the traditions of their ancestors are to be remembered at the same time that they are to be re-envisioned. Paul speaks on the subject of how to envision Christianity within the changing landscape of Jesus followers. He is concerned with how to put on the yoke of Jesus within these multicultural and diverse church communities. Paul aims to stop the bickering and the in-fighting so that the two sides can come together to share each other's burdens. The burden of not fitting in, of not being a part of the dominant culture, was too great a burden for either the Jewish believers or the Gentile believers to carry on their own.

In typical Paul fashion Paul's words come across as harsh, and are filled with connotations of a damning and exclusion filled Christianity. Paul's words describe an experience of being torn between what we think is right and what we actually do in our lives. It is the contradictions we often live. He uses the language of law and of sin, of good and of evil. Paul describes a situation in which we know what is right but can't help ourselves from doing the opposite. He goes on to explain how we can move past our inner contradictions by focusing on the ways of Jesus.

Sometimes we do the sort of things Paul is talking about. Sometimes we hurt people or do the wrong thing even though we know it's wrong. Sometimes we know we should do something more to help someone, but their geographic or social distance allows us the space to look away. Often, it isn't because we are bad people. More often than not, it is because we can't help ourselves at the time.

This reminds me of the story of a veteran I heard on the website, [Make the Connection](#). [Make the Connection](#) is a resource for military veterans to increase their mental health and well-being. The video I watched was the story of an Army veteran named Dawn.

Dawn is a Massachusetts native who signed up for the National Guard at 17 years old. Her parents reluctantly signed the paper as they were concerned about the ongoing conflict and deployment of troops to Bosnia. Dawn was still in the Army when her unit was deployed to Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom. In 2004, while she and her fellow medics were eating lunch in the chow hall, a man dressed in an Iraqi uniform entered the hall and detonated a bomb. 17 American soldiers were killed instantly.

While she was deployed, Dawn says she was fine. She was numb to the experience in the mess hall, and the near constant experiences of rocket and mortar fire from the bridges and hills surrounding her base. When she arrived home, she noticed she was growing increasingly impatient and hostile to her family. While she remained patient with co-workers and other veterans, she could not find the same empathy for her family. Dawn says, “I knew I could blow up at my parents and they were not going to go anywhere.” Eventually, Dawn realized that she was swinging between not sleeping and sleeping too much. She wasn’t just frustrated at her parents for not understanding her stories or the Army jargon she was using. She was angry all the time. She felt volatile and was often explosive.

Dawn decided to get help. She went to the VA and began to see a therapist. It took visiting a few different counselors before she found one she was compatible with. Eventually, Dawn began to heal, and, as she did, she found herself less and less angry. She lashed out less and handled her emotions more. The burden she was carrying became lighter. In her constant weariness, she began to find some rest.

Dawn’s healing allowed her behavior to more closely match her values. I imagine her heart softening until it became gentle and humble. As she finally began to put down the hyper-vigilance of PTSD, she found rest; moreover, she would find new vigor to continue her labors. Dawn still serves as an Army medic, in addition to her civilian job performing post-deployment assessments.

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This is a teaching about wisdom. Wisdom comes to us through the rigors of seeking truth, working towards understanding and, then, relaxing into the knowledge received. It is the ability to discern, and the wherewithal to do, what is right. In accepting this wisdom and continuing in the ways of love, mercy and peace, the yoke we carry as followers of Jesus is made easier. Our burdens are shared with one another and they are made light.

When you find your burdens have become too heavy, lay them down. Put them down. Come to Jesus, and he will give you rest.