

## YOKE OR HAMMOCK?

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 13, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Text

*“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”*

*At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.*

*“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.”*

Come unto me,  
all ye that labour and are heavy laden,  
and I will give you rest.  
Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me;  
for I am meek and lowly in heart:  
and ye shall find rest unto your souls.  
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

These words are among the most familiar and comforting in scripture. Their placement in funeral services and communion liturgies points to their power as a one-verse promise of the presence of Christ in times of grief, illness, loss, anguish, depression, loneliness, fear, sadness.

Yesterday I visited a dozen or so of our members in retirement homes or care facilities – what we used to call “nursing homes.” Different states of health, different states of memory, different states of waiting. There is no more appropriate verse for such visits:

Come unto me,  
all ye that labour and are heavy laden,  
and I will give you rest.

A near-universal statement of comfort.

### II.

But these words offer more than comfort for us in our time of individual need. An additional use of these words comes when what burdens us is someone else’s understanding of God’s will imposed on us in a way that feels contrary to God’s purposes.

One commentator I consulted for this sermon writes:

Often Jesus is understood to be wisdom (“Come to me...”) who invites people, burdened by the Pharisees’ interpretation of God’s will, to take [in its place] his [own] interpretation of God’s will.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Warren Carter, Matthew 28-30n, in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

The Pharisee's were one of a handful of dominant religious parties within the established Judaism into which Jesus was born and in which he was reared and educated. Yet as he grew up as the Messiah, he came to believe that the Pharisees' interpretation of God's will often stood in need of tremendous reform; just as some of us have come to believe that the interpretation of God's will put forward by churches into which we were born and in which we were reared often stand in need of tremendous reform.

- At times, Jesus felt the Pharisees were being overly demanding: "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others..."<sup>2</sup>
- At other times, he felt them to be hypocritical: "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me," he quotes Isaiah.<sup>3</sup>
- Sometimes he felt them to be more motivated by how they appeared than what they believed: "They love to have the place of honor at banquets and the best seats in the synagogue."<sup>4</sup>

In this context, when Jesus says:

Come to me,  
all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,  
and I will give you rest,

the "rest" Jesus provides is rest from the burden of religion that has gone wrong:

- Gone-wrong because it is overly pietistic
- Gone-wrong because it is overly moralistic
- Gone-wrong because it is overly simplistic
- Gone-wrong because it demands that we act a certain way, believe a certain way, think a certain way that contradicts our best understanding of the way God has created us and Christ has redeemed us to be
- Gone-wrong because it asks us to deposit our minds into the same cylinder in the narthex into which we deposit our umbrellas, so we will stain neither our faith with thinking nor our carpet with rainwater.

In place of this "religion gone-wrong," Jesus reaches back to the prophet Jeremiah, who said:

Stand at the crossroads and look,  
And ask for the ancient paths,  
Where the good way lies;  
And walk in it,  
And find rest for your souls.<sup>5</sup>

The "rest" of which Jeremiah speaks, the "rest" Jesus offers, is not that of an afternoon in the hammock. Rather, the "rest" Christ offers is this:

Take my yoke upon you,  
And learn from me;  
For I am gentle and humble in heart.

It is the "rest" of gentleness and humility, of learning and genuineness, simple yet deep, welcoming yet truthful. It is the "rest" of an authentic religion:

...ask for the ancient paths,  
Where the good way lies;  
...walk in it,  
And find rest for your souls.

### III.

A third powerful but perhaps less known use of these words of comfort from Jesus occurs when we face something cataclysmic in its danger and impact.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 23:4.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 15:8.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 23:5-7.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 6:16.

When Jesus speaks these words of comfort, he speaks them as the conclusion of an intense statement of lament revealing just how bleak he sees the world and its rejection of him.

“...To what will I compare this generation?” he asks.

“It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’”

Jesus goes on:

John [the Baptist] came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; [I] came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard...’

When Jesus says, “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden,” he believes (accurately) that the world is lodged against him and is plotting with its imperial power to stave off the reign of God he brings.

- Virtually no one accepts the redemption he offers, the way he provides.
- This is as dark and bleak a time as Jesus experiences this side of the cross to which he is headed.
- Without violating his role as Messiah, he has limited power to stop the onrushing train of rejection headed his way with headlights shining in his eyes but horn not blaring.

Yet in this bleakest moment, he still says: “Come to me, all ye who labour and are heavy-laden...and I will give you rest.”

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This past week, I have become more keenly aware than normal of people who have limited power to act in situations surrounding them, and yet who, within the narrow space their situations allow, are able to live toward and even embody the “rest” Christ offers.

I encountered a young mother who wears a blackberry on her belt twenty-four hours a day. She ranks high-enough in one of the security agencies of our country to monitor, minute-by-minute, threats from terrorism, international conflicts, and natural disasters. She can literally be reading her child a bedtime story, feel the vibration of the blackberry, consult it, take whatever action she needs to take, then return to reading the story.

When asked how she can rear her children in a world whose danger she monitors daily, she says:

When I am with my children I try to focus my energy on being the best and most loving parent I can be *in the moment*, so that no matter what happens, I know they will have experienced parental love.

She is “heavy-laden” with the “labour” of security. She *sees* daily what we *fear* occasionally. Yet she has taken upon herself the “yoke” of Christ, and “learned of him.” In his “meekness and lowliness of heart,” she finds “rest” for her soul. In the narrow space allotted to her as parent, she provides such “rest” for her children.

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A couple in our church recently shared with me, and gave me permission to share with you, that about four times a year they visit two brothers who are serving sentences of 15 and 49 years respectively, one for a felony offense and one for being an accessory to murder. This couple knew these now middle-age men and their family when the men were children. The family has fallen away from them. This couple is the only people who visit or correspond with the two brothers, the only connection they have with the outside world.

The couple writes:

Our relationships [with these two brothers] are built on mutual trust, respect, honesty, and care.

Our correspondence reflects their struggles to survive in the prison environment and our struggle to give encouragement, support and care.

They exist in a society where deceit and threat to life are the molecules of the stale air they breathe.

Hope for any better quality of life is dim if not non-existent.

We want to assure them of God’s presence in that place but there is no evidence of it.

We want to offer them the security of God’s protection and intervention.

But we can’t do this. This is the heart of our dilemma.

What Jesus faced was as bleak as what these two brothers face: "...deceit and threat to life [were] the molecules of the stale air [he] breathe[d]." Yet what Jesus offers is a way of being that this couple, despite their self-doubt, offers these two brothers: "Mutual trust, respect, honesty, care." In the prison setting, such traits are only able to exist in the narrow space created by four visits a year, a letter a week, brief phone calls separated by glass partitions and monitored by armed guards. But these traits *do* exist within that space. By helping create that space and develop those traits, both the couple and the brothers are

Stand[ing] at the crossroads...look[ing],  
...ask[ing] for the ancient paths,  
Where the good way lies;  
...walk[ing] in it,  
...find[ing] rest for [their] souls.

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Most of us do not work in highly-classified security positions, nor do most of us visit in prison. But many of us are aware of the bleakness of the world and the truly fragile and destructive situations in which we or others live. None of us can control the power that the yoke of history, the yoke of a family tragedy, the yoke of addiction, the yoke of war, the yoke of past misdeeds places on us today.

But within an often narrow limit, we can control what we do with *our* lives:

"I simply try to focus my energy to be the best and most loving parent I can be."

"Our relationships are built on mutual trust, respect, honesty, and care."

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Come unto me,  
all ye that labour and are heavy laden,  
and I will give you rest.

These words  
Comfort us at memorial services and communion.  
They invite us to throw off a mantle  
Of "religion gone wrong"  
In favor of the simple humility Christ offers.

They promise as well  
That no matter how bleak our surroundings are,  
In the narrow space  
Between those we trust or love, our God, and ourselves,  
We can choose the ancient paths  
That bring rest for our souls.  
Occasionally, we can even take that rest  
And change the situation.  
More often,  
We await that day when,  
Upon Christ's return,  
His rest permeates the entire created order:  
Prisoners go free;  
Their victims are restored;  
And the blackberry monitoring threats to the planet  
Goes silent,  
And "the land has rest from war."<sup>6</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Joshua 14:15.