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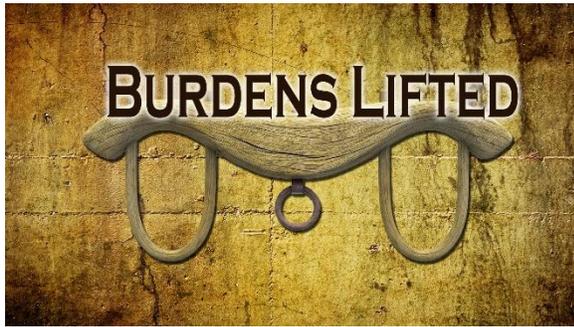
Title: Burdens Lifted

Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister

Scripture: [Matthew 11:1-7,20-24, 23:1-13](#)

Text: [Matthew 11:28-30](#)

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I was just beginning to put some thoughts on paper for this sermon when I received an email. The subject line bore my name as if it was a salutation, Randy. "Do you have a moment? I have a request I need you to handle discreetly. I am currently busy in a meeting now, no calls so just reply to my email." The sender was

none other than Rev. Randy Spleth. I was so busy in a meeting and so discreet in my inquiry that I was, emailing myself. The truth: Rev Randy Spleth was phishing for information from Rev. Randy Spleth. Alas, it was one of those email scams that are out there. Rev. Randy Spleth in my inbox, you aren't who you say you are.

Who you say you are is important and it is behind one of the most beloved passages of scripture in the Bible. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) Could there be a timelier verse of scripture than this? On this 4th of July weekend, it sounds so much like Emma Lazarus' poem on our Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." That sounds like rest, doesn't it? But more than a connection to an invitation to countless immigrants since 1886, it also sounds like us. Is anyone weary? Feeling heavily burdened? If not, you either have something wrong with you or something so mystical and divine within you that everyone needs to know what it is.

This verse of scripture comes when John the Baptist, not Rev. Randy Spleth, is fishing. Not the "ph" phishing newly invented for email scams but the "f" fishing that has been used for centuries to find out or verify information. Early in the 11th chapter of Matthew, before Jesus shares these memorable words, John sends some of his disciples to Jesus and asked, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" (Matthew 11:3) That is an interesting question, isn't it? Remember that this is the same John the Baptist we read about in the first chapter of John who sees Jesus coming towards him and say, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of

the world.” (John 1:29) Now that John is in prison, he is beginning to have some doubts. Stress can do that. Isolation can do that. During our pandemic, economic crisis and time of social unrest, have you noticed that your opinions about people have changed? Maybe it’s not a change so much as something isn’t lining up just the way you thought it would. When you aren’t face to face with someone, you can’t get the wrong opinion.

I am guessing that every day John sat in that awful jail, he wondered about the power of Jesus. Would Jesus come to save him? Did he have the power to do so, or was he not really who he said he was? Was Jesus the one who is to come or did they have to wait some more?¹

If Jesus is disappointed that John asked a question about him, he doesn’t say so. I think Jesus knows that John is feeling isolated, alone, afraid, carrying the heavy burden of his imprisonment. Jesus answers John’s followers saying, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Matthew 11:4-5) Do you hear what Jesus was saying? “What you hear and see” is what you get.” I am the authentic Jesus living out my call, my understanding, my mission as the Messiah. You might think you need something different, but this is who I am.

We don’t know how John received the news only that his disciples leave Jesus to return to tell him. I think he might have been disappointed because there are times when Jesus disappoints us. That might sound bad coming from a pastor’s mouth but the truth of the matter is we tend to want Jesus to act according to our expectations, and we grow disappointed when Jesus chooses to be our Lord instead of our puppet.

Jesus knows this about us and knew it about the people who were with him. As John’s disciples go back to tell the Baptist in prison that he is the real Messiah although he isn’t the type of Messiah that is going to spring him out of prison, Jesus clarifies who he is. First, he contrasts himself to John, then challenges the towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and even Capernaum, where Jesus lived for three years. They took for granted his miracles as if it was no big deal. At the very least, Jesus knows it didn’t cause them to change their ways. There is a sermon in that, isn’t there? Is Jesus making a difference in the way you live, what you say, how you act? Ask Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum what Jesus thinks if your answer is no.

Finally, he gets to the beloved passage. It is as if he has set everyone up. This is who I am and I’ll tell you why. All these things “...have been handed over to me by my Father” (Matthew 11:27a). Because the father handed

these things over to me and I choose to reveal them, listen carefully. "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." (Matthew 11:28-30).

It almost makes it sound as if working for Jesus is easy, and that the burden he gives us is a light one. Back in chapter 10, he was saying that whoever does not "take up the cross" and follow him is not worthy of him." I don't know about you, but a cross sounds like a heavy burden to me. I can't think of a heavier one. But Jesus can. If you search to see where else Jesus uses the word burden, it's in the 23rd chapter of this same Gospel in which he says, "The scribes and the Pharisees ... tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others." (Matthew 23: 2-4) The burdens he is talking about are all those religious rules the scribes and Pharisees wanted people to follow. Moses came down the mountain with ten commandments, but as the scribes and Pharisees searched the Scriptures they came up with a total of 613 commandments; 248 positive ones and 365 negative ones, a "thou shalt not for every day of the year. "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear," Jesus said. This is the only other place in the Gospel where he uses the word burden. He seems to be making a direct comparison between the burden of the scribes and Pharisees and his burden. His may be a cross but theirs is the burden of religion, which is a heavy load. ²

What does this mean for us? If Jesus is trying to tell us something about his core identity, about the authentic, genuine real deal Jesus, what is he saying? Two things: Jesus welcomes us! Do you hear the invitation from Jesus? "Come to me, all..." I picture the open arms of our Savior reaching out to hug and gather in everyone. Those who are invited are not powerful and successful. Instead, this invitation is for those who are "weary and carrying heavy burdens." We are all the invited ones today as we continue to struggle with the exile experience of our journey with the coronavirus. In a time when social distancing tells us to keep six feet away, there is this beautiful picture of Jesus reaching out to give us a big hug and to welcome us into his arms. For our weariness, Jesus offers rest. I need that picture of Jesus right now, don't you?

Jesus guides us! We should never assume that the welcoming invitation of Jesus is intended for us to rest and do nothing. The invitation of Jesus is another way he was saying, "Follow me." Jesus the One who welcomes us is also the One who guides us. And because we are visual learners, Jesus paints a picture using a yoke. ³

There may be a reason that he shares this image beyond simply a good illustration for the first century. There is a legend about the missing years of Jesus' life, the time between his teaching in the temple at age 12 and the formal beginning of his ministry at thirty. There are lots of legends. We wish we knew about those years. In this legend, Jesus was working as a master carpenter in his father's shop. One of things that he was known for was his crafting yoke for oxen. Jesus would design and craft personally tailored yokes that would be a "perfect fit" for the shoulders of a particular oxen. The yoke wore easily, like a fine fitting pair of shoes or a dress or suit. Because Jesus' yoke was well-fitting, it was both easy and light. To pull a plow with ill-fitting yoke created unnecessary burdens for the oxen. Jesus was the best at it. We don't know this; it was a legend. Of course, Jesus wasn't just talking about oxen. He's talking about following him, about his yoke. His yoke isn't the 613 unnecessary burdens created by the Pharisees. Jesus has only two. Love God and love neighbor.

That doesn't sound hard does it, an easy, a light burden? But it's more than that. Jesus is saying that if you will yoke yourself to me, you'll discover the greatest freedom. I guide you and show you how to love God and neighbor. You learn how to live life. This wooden piece of equipment that joins together two animals so that they may work together is just the right picture.

The Sunday School teacher asks, "Who can tell me what a yoke is?" she asked. A boy raised his hand and said, "A yoke is something they put on the necks of animals." Then the teacher asked, "What is the yoke Jesus puts on us?" A quiet little girl raised her hand. "It is God putting His arms around our necks."

In these frightening days of a global pandemic, we need to be reminded of what God does for us through Jesus. The message is very simple. In our pain, weariness, anger, fear, and anxiety, Jesus welcomes us and promises to give us rest. In our confusion, despair, impatience, and distraction, Jesus guides us and teaches us the way of life. This good news does not take our struggles away. But we can find hope in the fact that the arms of our loving Savior are lovingly placed around our necks. ⁴

I don't want to be accused of phishing for information from you. So, if you want to, you can blame the question on the Rev. Randy Spleth that is haunting some of the inboxes of email servers. But I have a request I need you to handle discreetly. Might this passage be something that could help? If so, don't call me. Don't even email me. Simply say, Yes. Yes, Lord Jesus. Take my heavy burden from me and yoke me to your loving ways." It will give you rest.

¹ Hull, David. Finding Rest for your Soul. July 5, 2020. Day1.org.

² Sommerville, Jim. The Burden of Religion. July 5, 2020. Asermonforeversunday.com.

³ Hull, David.

⁴ Hull, David.