

## Lectionary 14, Year A - July 5, 2020

Pastor Anne Van Kley

I have four children. And somewhere in the early weeks of the pandemic, when I was snuggling the two-year-old (who is very good at demanding snuggles) I realized that probably all of older children were missing the physical contact that they need for their social and emotional well-being. So I started making sure I hugged them at least once a day, for more than a second. People need touch. We need to experience tangible expressions of love and security from people we trust.

It's a biological need that goes back to our days in the womb. My two-year-old will lift up his arms when he wants to be carried. He'll point to his cheek if he needs a kiss on an owie. He'll climb onto my lap and bury his head on my neck when he needs to rest. Babies are good at this, and yet, as we age, we get worse at telling the people how much we need this.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus says, "Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." This feels like an invitation to be like my toddler, Matthew. To bring our hurts and our vulnerability and our tears to Jesus and just be held.

Some of you already know that this passage from Matthew is one of my favorites. It's personally really meaningful to me, because I first encountered it when I was at a low point in my life. Or maybe I should say, *it encountered me*.

I was 15 years old and had been through some trauma. At that time, even though I was raised in the church and prayed for every day by a community of saints, I was fed up with God talk.

I had reasoned that only one of two things could be true:

1) This all-powerful God I had learned about in Sunday School had for some reason decided I wasn't good enough for a happy life. This punishing, judgmental man on a cloud I had envisioned had decided I was a bad person who deserved bad things happening to me.

Or, 2) The whole religion thing is a lie, and there is no God.

Either way, in my mind, I had no need for a God who was either cruel or imaginary.

To make a long story short...one night, in the throes of insomnia and boredom, I picked up the Bible given to me in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. I flipped through it, rolling my eyes and scoffing and getting angry.

But when I came to Matthew 11, it actually stopped me in my tracks. Because I was weary. I needed rest. I needed a God who was gentle and humble. And I felt invited to just, give it a try. I remember thinking, "What do I have to lose? I don't believe in you, anyway." So I shared my burdens that night.

There was still a long journey of recovery for me after that. It wasn't a magical moment of immediate faith and healing. But the invitation to "Come," as I actually was, was enough to keep me going.

See, I learned through this passage that there's actually a third option.

Maybe God isn't an all-or-nothing; win-or-lose; yes or no; good or bad kind of God.

Maybe Jesus gets it. Jesus gets that life is really messy and complicated. Life and death, hurt and health, good and evil, hope and despair are actually completely intertwined and co-exist in our human lives. Jesus gets it, and simply offers to join us in the mess.

When my child comes to me with an injury, I don't make it disappear. I don't promise they'll never get hurt again. But I can sit with them while they cry, and I can cheer them on when they decide they're ready to get back up and play again, even though it might mean getting another owie.

When Jesus says, "take my yoke upon you," he isn't offering a free ride. He isn't promising to keep us from pain or hard work. He isn't saying, "OK. You can stop. I'll take it from here." No, a yoke is still a heavy thing that weighs on us.

What a yoke does is distribute the weight of the burden, so that it doesn't crush us. A yoke promises sharing of hard work, so that we can keep doing it. We don't get to stop carrying the load, but we are promised the strength and help we need to keep going. We are promised partners in the work, including Jesus himself, and all the saints.

I hear a lot of exhaustion these days.

Working moms trying to give *everything* to their kids and their employers literally at the same time.

Unemployed people beginning to feel desperate about their housing and their groceries and their medical bills.

Disabled people who face even more obstacles to getting their needs met.

Women and marginalized people like our biblical sister, Rebekah, whose decisions are made for her.

People whose cries for help or justice are being ignored or stamped out.

People in strained or abusive relationships trapped in quarantine.

People ready to throw up their hands because the work of racial justice feels too slow and too big and too hopeless.

People who fear they're fighting a losing battle with their cancer, or grief, or anxiety, or addiction, and aren't sure how much longer than want to fight.

Decision fatigue  
Zoom fatigue  
COVID fatigue  
News-cycle fatigue

People are tired.

Sometimes it feels like we don't have any good options. Sometimes our choices seem impossible:

We could quit. Quit the job, quit the treatment, quit the work, quit marriage, quit life...

But we also know we can't. There's too much at stake. This is when we start to feel anxious...like neither option is a good one.

That's when Jesus offers us a third option: Come to me. Take *my yoke* upon you.

It's not a way out, but it is help. It's a reminder that we don't have to save the world or our families or ourselves, by our self.

Come to me all you who are weary and carrying so many burdens that you can't even believe you're upright today.

Jesus sees your hurt, and will hold it. Because you need rest. You do.

And when we're ready again, Jesus blesses us - marks us with the cross like a mother kisses her baby on the head - and dusts us off and sends us back out to explore, to learn, to care, to fail, to succeed, to work.

I generally have a rule about not cherry-picking Bible verses. Because any time we pluck a passage out of scripture, we're removing it from its context, and that can be a really dangerous thing to do.

Which is I've always been hesitant to talk about this, my own favorite passage, and my own story about it. So I do encourage you to do a careful read of Matthew's Gospel. And when you do, you'll notice something interesting about these verses.

When Jesus says, "Come to me, all who are weary..." he's not in the middle of a sentimental sermon to burned out disciples.

He *himself* is burned out. He's been introducing himself, teaching, trying to help people understand who he is and what his mission is about. And they don't get it. He's frustrated. His ministry is *hard* and the people he's talking to, hard-headed.

So he stops, and he turns to God in prayer, and when he prays, "Come to me, all you who are weary," he's reminding *himself* that he isn't alone. That God will help him when this work of loving our neighbors and proclaiming justice gets hard.

So today, in whatever you're carrying...know you are in such good company. Even Jesus got tired of this work. It's *that* hard.

So be sure to rest. Be gentle with yourself and others. Turn to God when you feel you've exhausted all your options, and remember that there's nothing you have to carry alone.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and 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.”

Amen.