

Just a few days ago we celebrated the 4th of July, a summer holiday which often finds many of us on vacation – a chance to relax away from our daily routines, to hopefully rest and be refreshed, even regenerated. But how often have we returned from a vacation only to be more tired than when we left and return to jobs with work piled up on our desks awaiting our attention. So much for rest and relaxation!! Is there even such a thing as real rest?

Today, we're taking a look at part of chapter 11 of Matthew's Gospel, and specifically, the last three verses. This is one of, if not the best known passages of scripture, one that is familiar to most of us because we hear it a lot. I have heard quite a few people quote these verses from memory and state that they are among their favorite. And, why do you think this is? I think it's pretty obvious that all of us feel burdened and in desperate need of rest. I've been there – We've all been there. We're weary and carrying heavy loads. It's not just simple physical weariness (although that can be an issue). No, the weariness I'm talking about is so much more than that – it's deep soul weariness. Think for a minute about all of the things that weigh you down – you have too many commitments that demand your attention and you feel like you're being pulled in every direction; you face overwhelming, if not impossible problems and at times may even feel hopeless. There are setbacks, discouragements, disappointments, concerns about jobs, marriages, money, health, security – and the list goes on and on.

Our natural human instincts often take over and we try to deal with all of this in our own way. We might try to put some space or distance between us and the problem – we turn on the TV or radio, we go shopping. Or, we might pump ourselves up with positive thoughts, comfort ourselves with our favorite candy or ice cream. We might even call a friend and have a pity party. Our burdens are not always simple – sometimes they build on each other and become very complex. So why would we think that there is a simple solution that promises to lift the weight? We can, as long as we believe that the power behind the promise is strong enough to relieve the burden. That promise, the very words spoken by the Son of God are indeed strong enough. The message is simple, it's refreshing, and it offers hope. "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Jesus was addressing crowds of people who were under Jewish law – the law given by God to help guide the people through the moral maze of life. Unfortunately, the original laws had been embellished by often well-intentioned followers to the point that it was impossible to live within the law. Even the religious leaders and professionals were unable to stay within the boundaries of the law so what chance did the common person have?

But still, Jesus offers the invitation. He says, “Come.” - First, inviting those under the burden of the Jewish law, but extending it far beyond. He says, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and are heavy burdened.” **ALL!** That includes me and it includes you. It is without a doubt the most simple, yet most powerful promise ever given. “Come to me,” Jesus says. He doesn’t offer a four-fold path to peace-giving enlightenment like the Buddha does, or five pillars of peace through submission as Islam does, nor does he tell us to seek out a 12 step program on relieving weariness. Jesus simply and very directly offers himself – “Come to me and I will give you rest.”

Jesus had rebuked many of the cities and their religious leaders that had witnessed firsthand his miraculous deeds, demonstrating without a doubt his identity – and yet, they still refused to believe in him. When he says, “Come to me,” he means believe in who I claim to be and therefore in what I am able to do. For confirmation of his identity, we need look no further than the opening verses of chapter 1 of John. “In the beginning, the Word existed. He was with God and he was God. He was in the beginning with God. He is God himself – the creator, the eternal Word made flesh.” So if we believe in him and accept who he is and trust him, that should be quite enough. But, is it? Not for most of us. We want details. We want to know how and when our burdensome problems will be addressed. But, Jesus doesn’t provide those details. – He simply promises us that they will be addressed. “I will give you rest,” he says. This is an assurance that he will keep his promise in the best way at the best time. I Peter 5:7 says, “Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about what happens to you.” And Proverbs 3:5 states, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding and you will find rest for your souls.” NO DETAILS! – only the promise if we trust and believe. Jesus is the one answer to every question, every concern, every fear, and every need we will ever have. He simply offers himself and only in him will we find hope and rest for our burdened souls.

So if Jesus is promising us rest, why does he say, take my yoke upon you.” When we think of a yoke we probably think of a form of work, not rest. A yoke is a wooden frame fitted across the necks of two oxen or work animals to make them an inseparable team, one which can be controlled. The yoke is harsh and unyielding. Neither animal is free to go in its own direction because of the tight constraint on its neck – the two are yoked together and under the control of a master driver. Jesus takes this common word and applies it to his promise but he wants us to be yoked to him with a yoke that is not harsh or sharp, but manageable, even mild. When he invites us to take his yoke and learn from him, he is lovingly asking us to join him in harness, to allow him to take the lead and help us plow through our difficulties. So, with all this talk about a yoke, we should surmise that there is some work involved in finding rest and we need to know what is the labor that we are being asked to do for the rest that we so desperately seek? We find the answer in John 6:29. “This is the work of God, that you believe

in him whom he has sent.” And again in John 15:4, “Abide in me (like a branch in a vine).” Believe and abide – that is the work that God requires of us. That is the yoke that Jesus calls us to put on. And once we are yoked with Jesus, he promises rest for our souls. Now this does not mean that you can kick back in an easy chair with a cold drink and your remote control. Nor does it mean you can start working half days or a 3-day week. The Greek translation of the word rest is anapausin which means respite or temporary rest or in military terminology R&R – rest and relaxation in order to be refreshed for the work ahead, abiding in him, believing in him. Work that is motivated by a passionate desire to see God’s Kingdom realized, a future in which all of God’s dreams will finally come true.

There is a legend that Jesus, in Joseph’s carpenter shop, made the best yokes in all of Galilee. Men from all over the country came to him to buy the best yokes that skill could make. The ox was brought and measurements taken and the yoke was roughed out of wood. When the ox was brought back, the yoke was put on and carefully adjusted so that it would fit well and not gall the neck of the beast. But of all the carpenters who made the yokes, it was said that those that Jesus made fit the best. Shops always had a sign above the door and it has been suggested that the one on Joseph’s shop in Nazareth may have said, “My yokes fit well.” So when Jesus says, “my yoke is easy and my burden light,” what he means is : “The life I give you is not a burden to gall you; your task is made to measure, specifically meant to fit you and I will be yoked alongside you. Believe and abide in me and together we will face your struggles.

Eugene Peterson’s Message translation of this passage is very direct and easy to understand. He says, “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly. Real Rest! That is what our deep soul weariness yearns for and what only God can provide. Believe and abide in him. Amen.