

ALL YOU THAT ARE WEARY
AND ARE CARRYING HEAVY BURDENS
Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
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Text: Matthew 11:25-30

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."

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That was the text he was preaching on that Sunday, but the pastor wasn't thinking about his sermon when he pulled up to the church. He was late for the morning Bible study, and he was thinking about all the people sitting in the classroom, wondering where he was.

He hurried across the parking lot. He had his phone, a bag of bagels, and a laptop in one hand, and a Starbucks in the other. Kevin, the custodian, was taking the recycling out.

"You some help?" he asked.

"No, that's okay," the pastor said. "I got it."

He went to the front of the building and reached out his hand with the coffee and tried to open the door with his pinkie but couldn't. He set the coffee down on the sidewalk and tried again. With a full grip, he pulled the handle, but the door still wouldn't budge. It was mid-July in Kentucky, and the wood was swelled against the frame.

He tried a few more times and finally gave up. He'd have to walk all the way around to the back of the building and go in through the kitchen, wasting even more time. He reached

down to get his coffee, and that's when he saw Kevin standing behind him.

"You have to give it a real good yank," he said.

"I gave it everything I got."

"No, you didn't," Kevin smiled. "You didn't ask me for help."

The pastor grinned and felt kind of foolish as Kevin came over, took the phone, the bag of bagels, the laptop, and the Starbucks, and told him to try again. With both hands now, the pastor grabbed the handle and pulled as hard as he could. There was a little cracking sound, like a twig snapping, as the door came unstuck and swung wide open.

"Thank you," the pastor said.

"No problem," Kevin replied, handing him his stuff back.

Today in the gospel reading we hear Jesus promise that by coming to him, we can find rest for our souls, and by putting on his yoke, we can set down our burdens.

Yokes aren't exactly a household item these days. A yoke is a wooden beam that goes across the shoulders of an animal, like a horse or an ox, and the purpose is to harness the animal's power so it can pull a plow more efficiently. A yoke can also be used to connect a team of animals so they can all pull together.

As a carpenter, Jesus would have had a lot of experience with yokes. They would have been one of the most common things he made, and he would have known how important it is to make sure they're comfortable and don't rub the animal the wrong way. We can imagine him shaping the wood, smoothing down the rough spots, checking and re-checking, until the fit was just right.

That's the kind of yoke Jesus is inviting us to take upon ourselves, as disciples—one made with care by someone who understands what it's like to bear a heavy burden; one meant to make our work easier, not harder; one that relieves the stress and strain of living a life of service and sacrifice; and one that helps us pull together so we can accomplish more.

Just like Kevin in that little story, Jesus wants to help us out. He wants to relieve us of all the things that we're carrying, all the things that are weighing us down, so we can get on with our work. And all we have to do is let him. All we have to do is say yes, which doesn't seem too difficult. But the fact is, a lot of people find it extremely difficult, for a variety of reasons.

Some people feel like Jesus has enough to worry about, and they shouldn't bother him with more. When they're tired, when they're stressed, when they're overwhelmed by all the demands of ministry, they should just grit their teeth and power through it on their own.

Some people don't like admitting that they need help in the first place, even from Jesus. In a weird kind of way it makes them feel anxious. It peels back the veneer of self-reliance they work so hard to maintain and reminds them how vulnerable they truly are.

Some people simply don't think that Jesus is able to help them; they don't trust in his ability to do what he promises. They're like the climber who fell off a cliff. As he was tumbling down the side of the mountain, he grabbed a branch and hung on for dear life. "Help!" he shouted. "Is there anyone up there?"

Suddenly the sky opened up and a voice came from heaven. "I am the Lord, the Almighty. Let go, my son, and I will catch you."

The climber thought about it for a minute and then yelled back, "Is there anyone else up there?"

In my experience, however, the number one reason why some people have a hard time going to Jesus for anything is that they think they don't deserve it. They have a little voice in their head constantly pointing out how broken they are, and constantly telling them they're worthless. But I don't think God sees anyone as worthless. I think God values us for who we are and doesn't hold our brokenness against us. If anything, God works through our brokenness to accomplish God's will.

It's like story of the broken pot. Maybe you've heard it.

A long time ago, there was a man who worked for a wealthy landowner, and one of his daily tasks was bringing water up from the river. The man had two clay jars that he carried on the ends of a yoke. One of the jars was in perfect condition. The other one had a small crack in the bottom. The jar with the crack was always half empty by the time the man got back to the house.

After a while, the jar that was cracked started feeling bad about not being able to carry as much water, and one day as they were walking along, it apologized to the man for the being broken. "You have nothing to apologize for," the man responded. Then he pointed out all the flowers growing along the path and how they were only growing on the one side of the path, while the other side was bare.

When they got to the house, the man asked the pot if it knew why that was. The pot had no idea, so the man explained. "I always knew you were broken," he said. "But instead of replacing you, I spread seeds on the side of the path I carry you on, and every day when we're coming back from river, I use you to water them."

Those are some of the reasons why people find it difficult to take Jesus up on his invitation. I'm sure there are more. But whatever the reason may be, it doesn't have

anything to do with God; it only has to do with us. It doesn't have anything to do with God's love and compassion; it only has to do with our fear and insecurity.

The fact is, we're all broken, and we're all worthy, or else Jesus never would have called us to be his disciples in the first place. If we can only get that through our heads, we can finally set down our burdens, find the rest that we need for our souls, and get on with the task of being God's people. Amen.