

REST FOR YOUR SOUL

Matthew 11:25-30

We just finished celebrating Independence Day with great music, fireworks, and BBQ's. The 4th of July is an important holiday for our country because it is the birthday of our nation and our freedom. America is the home of Davey Crockett who conquered the "wild frontier" and Wyatt Earp who tamed the "Wild West." We honor and value independence, self-sufficiency, strength and the glory of a "self-made" man or woman. Surrender is what we did *not* do. With brains and brawn we became a super power in the world. "Yankee Ingenuity" is the brilliance that made this country what it is today. Resisting the yoke others would put on us is the strength that made us free. So, how do we hear the words of Jesus about taking up his yoke? How could we possibly agree to take on something that seems to restrict our freedom?

As we look closely at our sense of freedom, we can see that even the most free of us still feel a great deal of restriction in life. Our circumstances, social and religious rules, roles and responsibilities can often become yokes that drag us down. I have here several e-mails that will give you examples of some of our daily burdens and yokes (based on a liturgy from the Season of the Spirit):

One: Did you get that report done that I asked for? I was expecting to see it on my desk this morning but it wasn't there. I know you have a lot of responsibilities but, if your performance doesn't improve, we will have to find someone who can keep up. These reports are essential to our work. If you don't get them in on time, the whole project falls behind. You don't want that to happen, do you? I cannot stress enough how important these reports are. If you are not willing to put the time into this job that it requires, there are hundreds of other people who are. You're not going to let me down, are you?

Two: What happened to you, did you fall off the face of the planet? You haven't called or e-mailed me in forever. The other day I was expecting to see you at the get-together but you never showed up. That's not like you. You're always there when we need you but lately you've been kind of lame. Why do I always have to call? Why do I always have to be the one to e-mail? I mean, I thought we were friends but I never hear from you. What's wrong, are you mad about something? Anyway, the big party is this weekend. You haven't forgotten, have you? I am planning to bring that book you wanted to read – you know, the one I got for my birthday. If you want it, you better show up for a change. You're not going to let me down, are you?

Three: I really need you to get me to practice on time today. Last time I was late and I got in big trouble. Oh, and I forgot my project at John's house. Can you stop by and pick it up for me? I really need it for school. If I don't turn it in tomorrow I'll get an "F" on it. You don't want me to fail, do you? I was also wondering if you could stop by the mall and pick up those shoes I need. My teacher said we can't come to class until we have those shoes. I've already missed two days and you said you would pick them up last weekend. You're not going to let me down, are you?

Four: What's wrong with you? You haven't made it to the gym in three days; you're really falling behind and you're going to get a big behind, if you know what I mean. Then you had a banana split after the game last night. What were you thinking? Just because everyone else was having a treat didn't mean you needed to. Let's face it, you're not as young as you used to be and every little calorie finds a home on that body of yours. Tomorrow is a new day. I'll expect to see you at the gym by 6:30 a.m. You're not going to let me down, are you?

Five: Did you forget worship last week? You know that as Christians, we are required to worship God. You can't just skip out on your duties before God. What about your responsibilities on the mission committee? You have not been helping as much. I thought you were really committed to helping the poor, especially children. 16 million children die every year from preventable and treatable causes and you are telling me that you need some rest. I will expect you tomorrow in worship and at the Chicken BBQ fundraiser afterwards. God is expecting you to do this. You're not going to let me down, are you?

So, when we think about our freedom, we see that there is more to the story than just our country's freedom or civil rights. Jesus was addressing people who were saddled with heavy burdens in their social and religious life. The burden of the Roman occupation was heavy in taxes and lack of freedom. People lived under laws that didn't fit their way of life. The religious leaders were also making them live under the rule of so many laws. There was much talk in those days about the, "yoke of the Torah, or Law." After centuries of interpretation and study, there were about 613 laws that the Jewish people had to follow. Even their day of rest was governed by so many rules and practices that took the rest out of the Sabbath. So, when Jesus talked about his yoke(cf vv.28-29), he was saying his "law/yoke" was a yoke/law of love. "For my yoke is easy." The Greek word for "easy" is *chrestos* which is better translated as good. The yoke Jesus offers - to the simple, humble, poor, those tired of the burdens they carry - is a new society based on love. Their burden in God's reign is to live together in a community of love. Jesus' invitation is, "come to me and rest," "submit to My yoke." The spiritual rest Jesus gives, comes not from practicing 613 commandments of the Torah of Moses (or its modern equivalent), but from a living relationship with God where we receive direct revelation. The religiously "wise" in Jesus' time and in any time tend to forget that the most important part of faith is our direct experience of God. As human beings we get caught up in our descriptions and rules of how to relate to God. Our theology becomes the center of our faith. While true faith calls for our relationship with God to be the center. All of our moral teachings, theological views, and even biblical stories could become useless if they are not centered and grounded in our relationship with God. True rest and true freedom in life don't come from our theological knowledge of God. This is what Jesus was calling people to. He wanted them to renew their faith through focusing on what really mattered. This wisdom is often hard for many of us to get because it is so simple, yet so profound. It does not require more power, more knowledge, more wealth, or more status. In fact our so called knowledge can be blinding us to see God's presence in our lives. We can get so stuck in our thoughts about God that we miss the presence of God within us.

The "wise and intelligent"(v.25) according to our Bible story, belonged to the well-to-do people who could afford education. The expression designates the teachers of the Law - the high priests and the scribes – that is to say, the minority holding social and religious power. They are the ones who sit "on Moses' seat"(Mt.23:2) and who have taken over, "the key of knowledge"(Lk.11:52). They are important religious, self-assured people, who despise the marginalized and the poor. They considered themselves as the recipients of revelation and experts in the interpretation of this revelation. But Jesus challenges their authority and show that true wisdom is actually with those who are "infants"(v.25). The term in Greek, used by Matthew, denotes ignorance. They are simple people - but not in the sense of being morally and spiritually humble. They are indeed the simple, the poor, hungry, afflicted, and sick! Yet it is to them that revelation is first made known. They received the revelation that Jesus received from his intimate relationship with God - that God is love and that to love one's sisters and brothers is to know God. In the Bible, "to know" is like, "to love." This is the kind of rest for our souls that Jesus is inviting us to; rest that comes from being deeply connected to God's presence in us and around us.

This rest is so needed in our time because we live in an age of anxiety, fear and high expectations. William H. Willimon, a Methodist bishop and teacher, predicted that "our age shall be known, not as the age of freedom, but as the age of anxiety. We are anxious about many things: having enough money, having good enough health, being secure and safe."

Time magazine noted that back in the 60's, expert testimony was given to a Senate sub-committee on time management. They predicted that advances in technology would radically change how many hours a week people worked. They forecasted that the average American would be working 22 hours a week within 20 years. "The great challenge," the experts said,

“would be figuring out what to do with all the excess time.” 40 years have passed and as Americans we work harder and longer hours than most countries in the world. True rest comes from the depth of our relationship with God and not only from the increase in our knowledge. Parker Palmer, a Quaker teacher and writer, in a recent article wrote, “We live in one-eyed culture, a culture of either-or, that leads us to break apart things that belong together. The world of education is filled with broken paradoxes-and with the lifeless results:

- We separate head from heart. Result: minds that do not know how to feel and hearts that do not know how to think.
- We separate facts from feelings. Result: bloodless facts that make the world distant and remote, and ignorant emotions that reduce truth to how one feels today.
- We separate theory from practice. Result: theories that have little to do with life, and practice that is uninformed by understanding.
- We separate teaching from learning. Result: teachers who talk but do not listen, and students who listen but do not talk.

The best and simplest gift that is offered to us by God is the gift of rest for our souls; rest from false pretenses, rigid rules, empty promises, inflated egos, greedy pursuits, destructive exploitation and impatient lives. This rest comes from a deeper relationship with God where our soul becomes the guide for our lives. This is not about just taking time away for rest and relaxation, but it is about learning to have your soul be the guide as we live our daily lives. This is the life of true freedom when we are not living with internal conflict, but living with inner peace and connectedness. Oh, I almost forgot, one more e-mail!

Six: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” You will never let me down because I love you and you are precious in my eyes.