

Matthew 11:16-19, 28-30
“Trying to please everyone”
Brentwood First Presbyterian
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7/6/08

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men and women are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Do not let anyone fool you. Liberty and freedom need to be celebrated. Abraham Lincoln said, "Freedom is the last, best hope of earth." And our freedom is from God.

But we temper our celebrations with caution: With freedom comes great responsibility. Peter Marshall once said, "The choice before us is plain: Christ or chaos, conviction or compromise, discipline or disintegration. I am rather tired of hearing about our rights and privileges as American citizens. The time is come - it is now - when we ought to hear about the duties and responsibilities of our citizenship. America's future depends upon her accepting and demonstrating responsibility."

Freedom comes from God, but we are not free to live excessive lives. We are not set at liberty to pursue selfish ends. Our independence should not make us infidels. Pope John Paul II said, "Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought."

What is true for the nation is true for us as individuals: Liberty carries with it responsibility. Apostle Paul says, "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature." On this July 4th weekend, let's celebrate freedom and responsibility.

Movement 1 We wailed and you did not mourn;
We played the flute and you did not dance

John the Baptizer came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He is a demon." John is the messenger. Gaunt and ascetic John. Whose message is too threatening. Whose lifestyle is too unworldly. John says let us lament our past behavior and turn back to God. And his generation refuses. His generation wants John to dance. His generation writes off John because John abstains from happy social interaction. And our generation also writes off John the Baptizer. Writes him off as mentally unbalanced; the equivalent of being possessed by a demon in John's generation. Lets talk about demons for a minute.

Ours is an age that is filled with demons. That is right. You heard me correctly. There is more demon possession in the first decade of this 21st century than in all past centuries. And the problem is that we don't want to mention it because we think demons are part of the mythical past. We in our scientific world do not believe in demons. Not because they do not exist. But because demons are powers that take away our control, and leave us at

the mercy of powers outside ourselves. Like when Flip Wilson said, "The devil made me do it." We resist that.

Power is a demon. Power demons not only affect nations, but also individuals. Some folks must have power to prove their worth: guns, or political influence, or the power of terror.

Illness is also a demon. With all our scientific expertise, you think that we can put away this demon, but we can't. It comes as a curse, and we treat its victims as pariahs to be shunned and isolated.

Greed is a demon, threatening to make us slaves of want. Things are often more important than people, more important than faith. Greed drives accumulation, letting poor children fend for themselves.

Addiction is a demon. Addicts are always speaking of being possessed by their chemical or sexual demons.

Scripture tells us demons are legion. They enslave the individual, destroy the valuable, and release the very worst in us.

Jesus comes eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" A rebellious Jew worthy of stoning. Jesus is the one for whom John prepares the way. In meekness, Jesus announces the peaceable reign of unconditional love, forgiveness, and celebration of the goodness of life. Jesus, whose message is not "spiritual" enough. Jesus says, "Don't worry, be happy!" And his generation refuses. His generation wants Jesus to mourn. His generation writes off Jesus because Jesus banquets with sinners. Unlike 2000 years ago, our generation does not insult Jesus. But we do much worse. Our generation considers Jesus irrelevant, and we ignore him.

Demon possession exists, alright, but not in John the Baptizer, and not in Jesus either. The demons of power, illness, greed, and addiction. We are too busy being chased by our demons. We cannot see opportunities to rest even when they are staring us in the face.

Movement 2 We are weary

A German tourist is asked, "What impresses you most about the United States?" He answers, "The fact that you are a tired people impresses me a great deal; clerks, wives, friends, teachers, youth, leaders - you are all so tired!"

Could it be that he is right? Is America tired? Have we stewed and schemed and studied and slaved only to win the badge of shame and fear, ulcers and psychiatric appointments? Let us look at our society and see if he is right.

Let us look at our homes. Here we find divorce destroying thousands of homes a day. It

would seem that we are not too easy to live with. Other homes that manage to remain intact display no real zest or creativity or pizzazz! The mother and father both work so they can give their family the best, so they can have all the "extras." But they come home at the end of the working day tired and ill-tempered. There is a loss of communication. The home begins to deteriorate into just another laundry, hotel, and filling station.

The drugs we take also accuse us of being tired. "Pick-me-ups" are a morning must, a little "toddy for the body" in the afternoon, and, of course, the "tension reliever" at night. Did you know that it takes about 51 million sleeping pills to put America to sleep each night? Tired of coping with ourselves, we rely on pills to see us through.

Isn't it a paradox that Americans now have more leisure time than ever before, and yet we are so bone-weary we cannot face life, get involved and reach out to others? We are busy riding our motorcycles, fishing, vacationing at our second home, golfing. Yes, we are busy, and we are tired!

A more affluent society has never existed. And a more tired race has probably never breathed. Suicide is probably the most extreme form of cultural criticism. Did you know that suicide is now the number three killer of teenagers? It ranks high in adult deaths, too.

Yes, it looks like America is tired. Our homes, excessive alcohol, drug abuse, suicide, and short tempers all point an accusing finger at us. The question is, when will we realize that we have a problem? When will we admit that we are tired and need help? A psychiatrist recently stated that a person's greatest problem is in realizing that he or she has a problem. We are so proud. We try to be so self-sufficient. Yet on the inside we are weak and trembling.

This is why in the text for today Jesus asks only those to come to him who admit they are tired. He did not say, "Come to me all who are self-sufficient." He did not say, "Come to me all who are getting along quite well without me." He asks only that those come who recognize their need. He says, "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Do you admit that you have a need? Then come to him. "I will give you rest," he promises.

Are you tired? There is a Balm in Gilead.

Movement 3 Take my yoke upon you, and you will find rest

The prophet Isaiah was speaking to people much like us when he said,

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. - Isaiah 40:28-

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Freedom. What a beautiful word. It's what our text is about. Freedom from that which wearies us. Freedom from our demons. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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." What do YOU do when your soul is weary?

When your child or parent is ill and needs surgery, you take her to the best specialist you can find. You may have biology or anatomy as a hobby. Maybe you successfully dissected a frog in high school biology, or made an A in college anatomy. Still you would not even think of performing surgery in the kitchen on your loved one. You will trust her only to a specialist.

But how about soul-sickness! When something goes wrong with your spiritual life, to whom do you turn for repair? When your life is damaged or broken and you are left lonely, depressed, bitter, or divorced and afraid, to whom do you take your soul for the fixing? Do you go to the master, to a specialist, a professional? No! You go to Bob or Jim or Sue or Carol across the street. You trust some amateur's advice or the stars or a television psychic or Dear Abby. Or maybe the atheist professional counselor who says you can do this yourself. The counselor who leaves God out of the equation.

Jesus said, and still says, "Come to me! Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

If your life is broken, if you are hurting and in need of repair, bring your life to God through Jesus. He is the divine physician who can heal. He is the master repairman representing your manufacturer. He will examine your life. He will fix it.

When I was a Boy Scout, my backpack hurt my back and shoulders and rubbed them raw. So I worked on it. I put foam rubber pads between my shoulders and the straps. I put foam rubber between my back and the pack. I covered both with nylon so it would slip without chaffing. I could carry the same 50 pounds with less pain. This is like the yoke Jesus makes for us. God through Jesus teaches us to make our load seem smaller. But that is not all Jesus does.

A yoke is a piece of wood carved with a place cut out for the shoulders of not one, but two oxen. They are yoked together, making a team. The yoke is not one Jesus imposes, but one he wears! Jesus is saying, "Become my yoke mate, and learn how to pull the load by working beside me and watching how I do it. The labor will seem lighter when you allow me to help you with it. Let me teach you how gentleness and humility help you play together with others better than does arrogance and confidence in yourself." Jesus is the one who shows us the good way, where the restless can find rest for their souls.

Jesus speaks not of the yoke of the world. Not of the yoke of religious obligation. But of "his" yoke. Not a life of ease, but of relief from painful loads.

Conclusion

We are an anxious, despairing, and sometimes demon-possessed species, but yoked with the God of all ages and peoples, our burdens are eased. We are freed from our demons.

Are you tired? Exhausted? Burned out? Do you need a break? What you really need is neither time off nor time away. Rather what you need is time filled with meaning and purpose, that is saturated with the grace of God. What you need, according to this wonderful gospel text, is a different burden: the yoke of Jesus. To be yoked with him, to live as one of his modern disciples, brings refreshment for your spirit. It provides rest for the soul that is tired of chasing after elusive dreams and vain illusions. It provides freedom from pain and soul suffering and the demons which torment you. But best of all, being yoked to Jesus connects you with Jesus himself. The invitation still stands: take the yoke of Jesus and find peace, discover life and salvation, and rest for your souls.

"Come to me, all you that are weary... all who are carrying heavy burdens... shame, pain, despair, anxiety, addictions, betrayal ... all that keeps us from being happy... Come, and I will give you rest."