

*Light and Easy*

**A sermon preached by**  
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**Text:**  
Matthew 11:16-30

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## Matthew 11:16-30

[Jesus said:] “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, <sup>17</sup>‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’<sup>18</sup>For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; <sup>19</sup>the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

<sup>25</sup>At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, [God ] of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; <sup>26</sup>yes ... for such was your gracious will. <sup>27</sup>All things have been handed over to me by my [God] ; and no one knows the Son except [God], and no one knows [God] except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal [God]. <sup>28</sup>“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”



Is there anyone here who has never been weary? Never had to carry a heavy heart burden? Anybody who has had so easy a life that you're just sitting back now and you have not a care in the world? I didn't think so.

Here's how Eugene Peterson's *The Message* paraphrase interprets what Jesus says in Matthew 11:28. Sounds like the intro to a late-night television infomercial. “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.”

Remember that classic *I Love Lucy* episode when Lucy auditions to be the TV spokesperson for Vitameatavegamin? That's what I thought of when I read *The Message* interpretation.

Hello friends, I'm your Vitameatavegamin girl.

Are you tired, run-down, listless?

Do you poop out at parties?

Are you unpopular?

The answer to all your problems is in this little bottle.

VITAMEATAVEGAMIN.

Vitameatavegamin contains Vitamins, Meat, Vegetables, and Minerals.

Yes, with Vitameatavegamin, you can spoon your way to health. All you do is take a great big tablespoonful after every meal. Mmmmm... It's so tasty, too! Tastes just like candy!

So why don't you join all the thousands of happy peppy people and get a great big bottle of Vitameatavegamin tomorrow!

That's Vita-meata-vegamin! (wink)

After several takes during which Lucy has swallowed a tablespoon of this cure-all which contains 23% alcohol in addition to all its nasty-tasting healthy ingredients: “Do you pop out at parties? Are you unpopoosular? Well arrree you?!”

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion?,” says Jesus in *The Message*, “Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest.”

It's an invitation that I think is at the very root of what Jesus wants us to know about God and about what truly and fully depending on God can mean for us. “Walk with me and work with me –” Jesus continues, “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.”

Who doesn't want that? We all carry so much on our shoulders that finding somewhere to "lay that burden down" should be a gift worth celebrating. If there is somehow, somewhere, someplace to give me a moment to ease up carrying the baggage that is part of my life, I want that.

Strained or failed relationships, financial struggles and losses, physical and mental illness, addictions and distractions, caring for maturing children or for aging parents, too much work or not enough work, too much money or not enough money, failing bodies or confusing memories. You can click off whatever burdens or baggage you have in your life. You know them all too well – just like I do about my own life. We all have them – those things that either really weigh us down or just seem like they do – whatever they are they cause us to figuratively stoop and stumble at various times along our life's journeys.

I guess it's one of the reasons that I have learned to love summer so much these days. As a kid, summer was great – no school, lots of swimming pool time, friends riding bikes, vacationing at the Shore. As a young adult, the arrival of summer brought its own anxieties – making sure that my own young children were taken care of while both parents worked, balancing priorities and schedules, having enough money for at least a small vacation. And now with my children mostly grown it's a little more relaxing – I love my backyard with its hammock and garden and grill and umbrella covered table. And it's what draws me, I suppose, to statements like what I chose for our summer brochure cover this year. "Rest is not idleness, and to lie sometimes on the grass under trees on a summer's day, listening to the murmur of the water, or watching the clouds float across the sky, is by no means a waste of time. (John Lubbock)

For me these days, summer feels like that season when I can slow down a little and retool and refocus. And that's a gift. Sure, summer isn't a perfect panacea for stress and trouble. All that stuff

– all that burden – all that drags me down is still there. But maybe some of it can be on-hold for a little while. Maybe I can get a breather from work-related issues or personal problems. Maybe it's Pollyanna-ish, maybe it's naïve, maybe it's wishful thinking. Maybe it's just my Vitameatavegamin season these days.

But what Jesus suggests here is that there is something that can act in that way for our entire lives – there is something that can give us that sense of security and lessened anxiety and reduced burden – something that can straightened our bent over backs and massage our tension-filled shoulders. That something is a way – a way of living, a way of believing, a way of being – the Way.

Just as we do, Jesus lived in a world filled with rules and laws. Our laws we have mostly chosen for ourselves through our models of representative government and self-selected religious practice. Jesus, though, was living in a world when most of those restrictions and regulations were forced on people. Religious laws among First Century Jews were based on class, social status, gender, and ability and were founded mostly in fear of the unknown. And many of those laws were true burdens to the peasant class among whom Jesus walked and lived.

Those who criticize John the Baptist and Jesus and their followers are like whiny little children, says Jesus. John and his disciples fast and live an austere life and critics – the religious elite, the wealthy and powerful political leaders – say they are out of their minds, they have demons. Jesus and his disciples are not as strict about their fasting – they eat and drink – they don't cover themselves in sackcloth and ashes – they laugh and party – and these same critics say that the Jesus-folk are irreverent – they are drunkards and gluttons. Which is it?

This generation, says Jesus, these critics, are like children in the playground. Within this cultural context, men at weddings were responsible for dancing the circle dance – it's what little boys grew

up knowing they would do when they were men – they would have the same responsibility so they practiced it as a game when they played. Little girls knew they would be the professional mourners at funerals as were they're moms and grandmoms and their older sisters – they would mourn as was the custom – so of course while they're little they would play at this grown-up task. Boys dance in the playground pretending at wedding; girls trying out their weeping and wailing skills at pretend funerals. And, as children do even today, I'm sure they taunted each other across the playground – nany, nany, woo, woo ...

We do the same, says Jesus. You have to give up that burdensome yoke that those mostly unnecessary rules place on your life.

"Yoke" was a common image for Torah and the Mosaic Law. And here for Jesus the word, "yoke," symbolizes the religion of the Pharisees and what they taught about God, how they thought God was a god of judgment and vengeance. The Pharisees would control the common people by demanding of them a life filled with a thousand rules and regulations which essentially said, "No, no, no, no, no" to everything. Negative, negative, negative, negative, negative. To the Pharisees, it seems, God is a negative entity who will punish you for your failures.

Instead of Torah, however, we are invited here to take up Jesus' yoke and to learn from him, to become a *mathete*, a disciple. The "yoke" of Jesus is to learn his Way and follow it. This Way of Jesus, Jesus' yoke, is easy compared to the Pharisees with all their harsh and negative rules. Some of the commentaries I read define Jesus yoke like this:

- "The yoke of Jesus is humility and concern for the despised."
- "For my yoke is lovingkindness." The word is *xrestos*-- "goodness, benevolence, pleasant, worthy, loving, kind,"

or, even better, "active benevolence in spite of ingratitude." "Easy" is OK, but I'm going with "lovingkindness."

- "Jesus' way is 'easy': love God and each other! He is both teacher and the one to emulate."
- "Jesus does not weigh His disciples down with teaching that they cannot follow. Yes, it is tough sometimes, but it is always founded on love. Jesus invites His disciples to shoulder His yoke and learn from Him - gentle and humble in heart."
- "To take Christ's yoke means to submit to His person as the one who is gentle and meek, as one who is gentle and caring and concerned for us. It means to put yourself under His leading, to join yourself together with Him, but the difference is, He is the yoke mate and this is how He can give rest."

The way that Jesus taught – the God that he knew and wanted us to know – is loving and forgiving and compassionate – simple and positive is the Way of Jesus. To love God and love neighbor. To love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul and your neighbor as yourself. To be merciful, loving and kind. To have faith that moves mountains and carries momentous burdens. To worship God and love one's neighbor. Jesus' Way is filled with simple *positives* like worshipping God and practicing mercy. The mood of Jesus' Way is celebratory and joyous. And that's a different way. We all *need* to wear the yoke of Jesus. We all *need* to wear the religion of Jesus. Love of God. Love of neighbor. Mercy, love, and kindness. The invitation here is for us to be disciples, to learn from Jesus as our teacher. We are to learn gentleness and humility, love and forgiveness, faith and trust in the goodness of God. We are to have faith that moves mountains.

"Come to me ... and you will find rest for your souls." That word Matthew uses here is *anapausin* which means not just "rest," but Sabbath rest, the kind of rest that puts a person on the road to renewal and recuperation and recovery. It has a sense not only of rest, but also refreshment. God calls us to practice Sabbath rest – it

is perhaps the most basic of all of God's requirements for us. And the word Matthew chooses that we hear as "soul", *psuxais*, is better defined as that which is the essence of a person's life, more than just "soul." A better translation might be something like: "Come to me ... and you will find renewing Sabbath rest for your very being-ness ..." Following the Way of Jesus will set you on a path of true and fulfilling life.

That's what speaks to me about the Lubbock quote. "Rest is not idleness." Full rest is about that renewal that we each need so desperately. Maybe it comes in the summer if we get a chance to lay our burdens down for a respite. "[T]o lie sometimes on the grass under trees on a summer's day, listening to the murmur of the water, or watching the clouds float across the sky, is by no means a waste of time." The rest that we long for is never a waste of time. It is a God-given requirement for fullness of life – "I came that [you] might have abundant life," says Jesus. (John 10:10).

It is what we long for and it's right there for us to grab hold of. In order to gain that rest we have to answer Jesus' invitation to participate in his deeds of power and his life of joy, we have to lay down certain burdens that we have mistaken for blessings.

Alyce McKenzie, Professor of Homiletics at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, who I knew when she was a graduate student at Princeton Seminary, writes that it reminds her of a time worn anecdote about catching monkeys in the wild:

When trying to catch a monkey for the zoo trappers take a small cage out into the jungle. Inside the cage they place a bunch of bananas and then they close it, locking the bananas inside. A monkey coming along and spotting the bananas, will reach through the narrow rungs of the cage and grab a banana. But he can't get it out. And no matter how hard he tries—twisting his hand back and forth—he can't pull his hand through the rungs while hanging on to

the banana. And even with the approaching trappers he won't let go of the banana. For the trappers, it's simply a matter then, of coming up and grabbing the monkey.

We have to lay down those burdens that trap us so badly – let go of that banana to avoid being trapped.

To be told we can lay down our burdens sounds so sweet, until we realize that, in Jesus' eyes, many things we view as blessings are actually burdens.", writes McKenzie,

These would include, both in his time and ours, judging others, viewing oneself as occupying a superior position to others and entitled to a more comfortable life with more material possessions, and making a vocation of excluding and avoiding the unclean and the sinner, those on the bottom rung of the social ladder. To those who view those things as their birthright and most cherished possessions, to be required to divest oneself of them sounds like sacrifice. And it is. But it is on the way to a life of being forgiven, being refreshed, and being empowered to live with the humility, discernment, courage, and compassion that is the essence of Wisdom.

"Take it light and easy ... Learn the unforced rhythms of grace." Isn't that a beautiful way to end that message.

"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 –," Jesus continues, "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."

It's the Jesus Way.

Amen.