

Trouble Weighs a Ton

Matthew 11:28-30

Rev. Dan Schumacher

It was a few years ago now, and Christen and I had loaded up in the car for a long drive. I don't remember whether we were headed up to Wyoming to visit her family or down to Texas to see my family, but I'd handed her my phone – which, at any given moment, has roughly four-to-five thousand songs on it – and asked her to pick out some music for the road.

After a few minutes, I said, "Soooooo... you gonna play some music or not?"

She looked up at me, looked back at the phone, looked back at me, and with a wry smile, said, "Well do you want to listen to some sad music or some *really* sad music – because those are the only options you have on this thing? Thousands upon thousands of songs, Dan, and it's *all* sad."

I don't know why, but I love sad songs.

Music psychologists call it the "Sadness Paradox." They point out that sadness, which is often perceived as a negative emotion, is actually sought out by some people when it comes to music. And they suggest that people who are high in *empathy* are more likely to enjoy sad music. This might be because we empaths are more easily moved by the perceived emotions.

Whatever the reason, I love sad music.

My music library is filled with the likes of Robert Johnson, the king of the blues, who is said to have met the devil at the crossroads one dark night and sold his soul, so that he could be the best blues guitar player in history. His voice is as haunting as his story.

I love the high and lonesome sound of Hank Williams, Sr.: "Hear that lonesome whippoorwill, he sounds too blue to fly..."

And, once in a while, I come across the blues in a less likely place. One of my favorite songs is by Dan Auerbach, the lead singer of the rock duo, The Black Keys. It's called, "Trouble Weighs a Ton."

It goes: "What's wrong, dear brother?
Have you lost your faith?
Don't you remember a better place?
Needles and things done you in
Like the setting sun
Oh, dear brother, trouble weighs a ton"

The second verse:

“What’s wrong, dear sister?
Did your world fall down?
Men misuse you and push you around?
Same story dear, year after year
Pathetic men run
Oh, dear sister, trouble weighs a ton”

Trouble does weight a ton, doesn’t it?

And trouble doesn’t just have to be understood as days addled by drug addiction or abuse at the hands of another. Sometimes trouble is another rent payment due and not enough dollars in the pocket to cover it. Sometimes trouble is a child struggling in school and, as a parent, watching what it does to your child’s sense of self worth. Sometimes trouble is a job that keeps food on the table, but seems to cost you your soul. Sometimes trouble is the painful end of a once happy marriage. Sometimes trouble is being as lonesome as a whippoorwill, whose just too blue to fly.

Trouble weighs a ton.

Today’s passage is one of the great consolation passages of all time. “Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden,” says Jesus, “and I will give you rest.”

It’s a verse etched on tombstones or worked into stained glass. It’s carved into plaques in church prayer rooms the world over. And, especially today for us Americans — the day after Independence Day — it is difficult to hear these words from Jesus and not recall the words on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty:

“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,” (Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” 1883).

“Come to me,” says Jesus, “all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Barbara Brown Taylor recalls when she was still a hospital chaplain, and she conducted Sunday services in a tiny chapel on the ground floor of big city hospital:

“Every Sunday morning at ten my congregation of four, or five, or six would arrive: a man in pajamas pushing an IV pole, a patient from the psychiatric ward chaperoned by an orderly, the parents of a child who lay close to death from spinal meningitis up on the sixth floor. One by one they hauled their grief and misery into that little chapel where there was not much to see — just an electric organ, and the backs of one another’s heads, and a simple pulpit made out of light oak with a few words carved on

the front of it: ‘Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.’”

She continues, “It is a wonderful promise, a comforting promise to which many of us turn when our burdens seem impossible to bear... It is a promise that offers hope of help, hope of a God who will lift the sweaty loads off our backs and replace them with a lighter yoke, lighter because it yokes us with one who is greater than we are, and with whose strong help we can bear any burden” (“The Open Yoke,” *The Seeds of Heaven*, 17).

That’s what the passage means to many of us today, but it meant something different when Jesus first said it.

Jesus had just finished a Billy Graham-style crusade through the region of Galilee. He’d marched through the Galilean cities performing miracles, teaching his way of faith and life, and instead of welcome he’d received rejection. The cities had been less than warm toward him. The people were not looking for his help. And whatever gifts he’d hoped to share with them, they declined to take.

The Galilean mission was an utter failure.

The passage leading up to our verses today make that clear. They’re filled with strong reproaches toward those who refused to welcome him, and so he thanks God for showing things to the simple people, but keeping them from the wise.

And then Jesus offers his words of consolation to those who have been carrying heavy burdens, some of which, it might seem, have been laid on the shoulders of the simple ones by the wise and understanding ones.

In the first century, that could have been burden of literal labor – physically demanding slave labor. Or it could have been financial burden. Roman taxes were an ever-increasing weight around the neck of those who were barely scratching out a living.

But, because this story is in Matthew, it’s likely that Jesus meant *religious* burdens as well. By the time Matthew sat down to write, the first Jewish revolt had failed and the Temple was in ruins. With the Saducees out of business and the Zealots on the lam, the Pharisees were the only religious party left standing – and the future of Judaism seemed to rest in their hands.

The Pharisees were devout Jews who practiced their devotion by strict observance of external rituals. By the third century, the Pharisees distilled all of the Hebrew Bible (or the Old Testament) into 613 observable, practicable laws. They said things like, it is lawful to pick up your child on the sabbath, but if your child has a rock in their pocket and you pick the child up, then you have defiled the sabbath, because you have done labor.

Imagine, if you can, believing that you have to observe 613 nit-picky laws, or else you'd fall out of favor with God. Such a yoke could be a heavy one to bear.

But lest we look down our noses at our Jewish brothers and sisters, maybe we'd best examine our own yoke first. Our long standing debate — the one with which Paul wrestled, and Martin Luther after him — is the struggle between grace and *works*.

In the traditional telling of this passage, when Jesus offered his heavy-laden listeners a lighter yoke, he was offering them a religion of grace to replace the religion of works under which they labored. But as best I can tell, the truth is that every human being who longs to know God lives within the tension between grace and works.

We like to think that God is utterly unimpressed with our efforts to win God's love, but we also live like we have to keep up our best effort in order to retain God's love.

Follow us around for a day or two, and you may discover what we believe most by how we act. We keep a list a mile long, and shame ourselves into despair when we don't meet its demands. It's filled with things we think we ought to do, we should do, we had better do, or else God might stop loving us!

Get up early, read our Bibles, spend time in prayer, help someone in need, bless the meals, give our tithe, pray for the missionaries, give to the missionaries, go to church (virtually, not in-person yet), don't cuss at that guy who cut you off in traffic, don't lose your temper at the rude clerk at the grocery store, don't admit to feeling lonesome, but don't lie, and, for the love of God, whatever you do, do not bring coffee into the sanctuary on Sunday morning!

I love the way Barbara Brown Taylor says it when she says, "I may believe that I live by God's grace, but I act like a scout collecting merit badges."

We Christians have a strange way of turning Jesus' easy yoke back into a hard one again, don't we?

It gets all of us — even the best of us.

Take, for instance, the well-known, African American preacher, Pastor Howard-John Wesley.

Wesley is the pastor of Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, just outside of Washington, D.C. And if you think we're historic, listen to this: Alfred Street Baptist was founded when Thomas Jefferson was president, and in it's nearly 220 years of being a church, Wesley is only their eighth pastor.

He came to the church in 2008, and since then the church membership has grown from 2,500 to over 10,000 members. When I said well-known pastor, I meant it. Howard-John Wesley is the *real deal*.

But he shocked his congregation last December when he announced out of the blue that he was taking a sabbatical from the church for a time of spiritual renewal and rest. He shared that there has not been a single day in the last 11 years when he has woken up without knowing there was something he needed to do for the church.

“Here is the greatest deception of the devil,” Wesley confessed, “to convince you that the busier you are the more important you are.” (Bob Allen, “High-profile pastor’s sabbatical renews attention to clergy self-care,” *Baptist News Global*, December 19, 2019).

It’s easy to do, even if you’re a pastor revered and respected in all circles, even if you’re the real deal. It’s easy to turn Jesus’ yoke back into a hard one.

In that sermon to his congregation, Wesley elaborated, saying, “I feel so distant from God...One of the greatest mistakes of pastoring is to think that because you work for God, you’re close to God, that you allow your work to be mixed with your worship.”

He added, “I want to draw back closer to the Lord. Sunday worship does not make up for a deficiency in prayer. Serving in ministry doesn’t make up for a deficiency in prayer. I want to read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation without trying to write a sermon. I want to travel and sit in the back of somebody’s church and hear the word of God and not worry about what time we’ve got to get out for the next crowd. I want to go to church and only go to one service.”

And after years of preaching multiple services while early morning attendees visit over brunch, he confessed, “I want to know what a Mimosa tastes like on Sunday.”

Howard-John Wesley concluded, “If you really want to be holy, you’ve got to learn how to rest”

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me,” says Jesus, “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” (Matthew 11:29-30).

If you’ve ever traveled around the world or if you’ve even read *National Geographic*, then you know that there are two basic kinds of yokes that can be used to bear burdens: single ones and shared ones.

I think many of us labor under the illusion that our yokes are single ones, that we have to go it alone, that the only way to please God is to load ourselves down with requirements — good deeds, pure thoughts, selfless acts, blameless lives, perfect obedience — all those rules we make and break; we make and can’t keep. And all the while Jesus is standing there in front of us, half of a shared yoke across his own shoulders, the other half wide open and waiting for us, a yoke that requires no more than that we step into it and become part of the team.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” It’s no wonder these words have weathered the centuries so well; no wonder they are still music to our ears.

They assure us that those who please God are not those who can carry the heaviest loads alone but those who share their loads.

That day in the car... Christen wasn’t completely right when she said all I had was sad music. She was over-exaggerating... a little. Only about 95% of it is sad music. But there are some happy songs, some uplifting songs in there, too.

There’s Randy Newman:

“You’ve got a friend in me; you’ve got a friend in me.
When the road looks rough ahead,
and you’re miles and miles from your nice warm bed –
Just remember what your old pal said, You’ve got a friend in me.”

There’s some James Taylor:

“Winter, spring, summer or fall
All you’ve got to do is call
And I’ll be there, ye, ye, ye
You’ve got a friend.”

And there’s the late, great, Bill Withers:

“Lean on me, when you’re not strong
And I’ll be your friend
I’ll help you carry on.”

Trouble does way a ton, but, says Jesus, we don’t have to carry it alone.

“Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Amen.