

“The Yoke’s On Me”

Sermon – July 9th, 2023

By now, you may know my tendency to plan things out, to schedule and prepare. Just as I do for my family and my daily life, well, it’s the same with Expanding Horizons, the week-long camp I just led for high school students at Maryville College. I spend a big part of my year devoted to that week. I map out the schedule. I plan activities for a variety of personalities and learning styles and abilities. I prepare time each day for my workers and I to debrief together and to each get a break from one another and the campers. But the inevitable always comes, usually around day 3 or 4 of camp...we all hit a wall.

It is a wonderful week, but it is also a week that pushes all of us beyond our limits: late nights with little sleep, a strenuous schedule not of our choosing, being on call for anything and everything, challenging tasks like the Alpine Tower and managing food allergies, and just enough variety in personalities for all of us to get a little frazzled at the edges.

My wonderful college student staff and I, along with our new friends previously known as campers, all get to a point when we are weary. We are worn out, we are tired. We are emotionally wrecked, we are mentally fatigued, and we are physically exhausted.

It is at that point in the week when all of us get a bit testy. Our mindset turns inward toward self-preservation instead of reaching outward for connection. We, even with our best intentions, can come across as rude or mean. Our words, even if we mean them in jest, can be taken to heart as bitter critiques. Our sarcasm can become our preferred language and our kindest selves just don’t seem to shine as bright as they once did. Our rose-colored glasses have broken and we don’t see the

best in one another. Our filters have faltered, and so our attitudes and facial expressions can be a bit strong. There are bound to be some hurt feelings from misunderstandings and also tears from just being overwhelmed.

It's at that stage in our week, when nerves are on high alert and our feelings on our sleeves are flapping in the wind like a tattered flag...that we usually have what I like to call a "come to Jesus meeting." A time to recall why we are there, reflect on our feelings, remember to be kind, and rejuvenate ourselves through rest and maybe some chocolate and laughter. A time to back-peddle out of our self-preservation mode and return to our lives as disciples and as children of God. It's a turning point in our week when we stop relying on our own strength and will power to make it through those late nights and long days, and we start turning our attention back to Christ...relying on the power of the Holy Spirit to inspire our interactions, interpret our best intentions, and invigorate our imaginations.

When I think of the wall of weariness that we all hit in the middle of camp, I believe our passages in Romans and in the Gospel of Matthew are pretty fitting. One shows us the brokenness and complete human tendency towards weariness, while the other offers us hope and a new direction in the face of fatigue and failure.

I am struck by this particular passage in Romans and how it shows us the human side of Paul. You know, Paul, whose letters to the early churches make up a large portion of our New Testament. Paul, who can come across as a mighty apostle, perfect and demanding, even a bit holier-than-thou, in some places. Paul, who is a big name, all these centuries later. Yep, that guy. In this passage he lays out all his struggles and shows that he is a flawed and failed person, just like the rest of us.

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate," declares Paul. "Nothing good dwells within me...I can will

what is right, but I cannot do it.” He even goes so far as to call himself “wretched” but then his despair and weariness lead him to ask the most important question: “Who will rescue me?” And he finds his answer in Christ.

Paul states that he has tried to do what is good, but he can't. He has tried to follow the laws, but even his actions with the best intentions have turned out distorted. His diatribe sounds like many of the talks I had with campers and staff when we hit that wall of weariness: laying out all the ways we had tried to do this or thought we would be ok with that; how we didn't understand why we were so upset; how we were overcome with raw emotions and overwhelmed with fatigue from fighting so hard to just be ok.

As much as I try to tell myself that Expanding Horizons is only one week of the year and as often as I remind my staff that we will all see blue skies and earlier bedtimes when the week is through, I have to be realistic. Real life is just as difficult and exhausting as camp life. My staff workers and I persevered through a tough week and were blessed by the new people we met and the way we saw God show up in it all. But then we went back home...and we were thrust back into the real world of family dynamics, other jobs, class work, health issues, and the everyday stuff that can also bring us to that nerve-wrenching point. One staff member returned home to then speed off to the emergency room with her dad and spend the next few days at the hospital as he went through surgery for a brain tumor. Another went straight to work at another camp to lead more high school students without even stopping at home first. One washed and re-packed her things to go on a week-long road trip with her family (and as fun as that can be, we all know you hit a wall during those too). Another had to pack up her childhood home as her family prepares to move. Our campers also returned to their

homes: with jobs, preparing for college, struggles with money, life transitions, and family issues.

Real life...it is not for the faint of heart, but it is also something we are not called to do alone.

In our passage from the Gospel of Matthew, Christ offers us a better way. First, Christ recognizes and reiterates our humanity: we are infants...unable to do it all, needing guidance, requiring instruction and teaching so we can grow and be disciples. Then, Christ calls us, infants that we are, to come to him: to bring our weary souls, our missteps, our human tendencies, our broken relationships, our fatigue from hardships...to bring all of this to him. Christ offers us rest, but it is not a nap in the middle of the day or a break from life. Rather, this rest is found in being in relationship with Christ and knowing that we do not travel this way or this life alone. When we are able to find our rest in Christ, we are given the strength and energy to also invite others into the fray, to reach out and offer rest to those who are also weary and carrying heavy burdens.

We all, in our striving to live our lives, to be in relationships with one another, to persevere through hard times...we grow weary. We cannot do what we want to do. We cannot achieve perfection, we cannot achieve salvation. Paul knows this and realizes that no matter his failure, no matter his weariness, God is the one who has surpassed those obstacles. God alone is the one who can offer us salvation and use our meager, weary offerings to bring about good in the world. Christ carries the burden, and it is "light" to us because we are not called to carry it alone. We are not called to bring about the kingdom of God alone, we are not called to be perfect or to earn our salvation or to even save the burning world around us...not on our own, not through our own works or our own will.

The ways of God are higher than ours, we are but infants in a world that needs the guidance and care of a Parent, of an Advocate, of a Savior. We are not called to bear those titles, but we are invited to share in Christ's ministry right beside him. It requires trust, it requires connection, it requires us learning to walk in step with Christ...taking breaks, being mindful of our pace, being careful with how far we try to stray from the path, but knowing that we are connected to Christ in a way that is not through our own will but through his calling and his faithfulness. Pastor Rich Villodas states, "We are called to live by faith. Not a faith centered on our own ability to believe. A faith centered on the faithfulness of Jesus."

Christ will lead us and Christ will be right there beside us, his faithfulness knows no end. Christ is present, walking and working with us...not steering us with reins but guiding us through relationship every step of the way, bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders, and what better one to carry that than our Lord and Savior. Just as the Christmas hymn goes:

"Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn."

May we find our worth in him and not in the weariness of the world. Thanks be to God.