

Matthew 11: 28-30 Sharing the Load

Debbie Stockdale, July 5, 2020

This morning we are looking at how a little piece of wisdom from the gospel of Matthew can help us as we live with the COVID 19 pandemic that has changed our lives so dramatically in such a short period of time. The degree of change we are living with is quite breath taking! Who would have thought that hugging would ever be a high-risk activity? Or that we'd all zooming in to church on Sunday morning? Or that those living in lodges and care homes would be asked to stay in their suites and not to go outside or have friends and family come in for months on end. The list goes on and on.

In my conversations with people over the past few months, I've noticed that for some this unique time in history isn't so bad, for some it is awful and for most it is a mix. I've also noticed that, even for those who say that it isn't so bad, there are days when their anxiety rises to the surface and hangs out for a while. I have been meditating over zoom with a friend of mine who lives in BC. She has a ton of skills for managing anxiety and even for her, who teaches meditation, is a healing pathway practitioner and practices yoga every day, there are better days and worse days. No one is exempt!

For me, the biggest temptation is trying to fix things on my own. I worry and fuss and lose sleep all to no avail. Some situations, like the COVID 19 pandemic simply aren't fixable. There is no magic bullet, no loop holes, nothing we can do to avoid it. Given that we are stuck with COVID for the next while and we don't know how long a while, what are some tools we can use to help us do the best we can during these stressful times?

These 3 verses from Matthew offer us a perspective that can be helpful. Jesus says:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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."

Just listening to this is restful and reassuring. But what does it actually mean and how do we actually manage to share our loads with Jesus?

For those living in the time of Jesus, a yoke was a common sight. It is a type of harness used for working animals that hitches them together so that they can pool their strength to pull a heavier load for a longer period of time. A typical image is of a team of oxen plowing a field or pulling a heavy wagon. Jesus isn't offering to take our burdens away but to help us cope with them. A trouble shared is a trouble halved.

But listen further into the story. There isn't anything miraculous in what Jesus is offering. The bills will still need to be paid and the pandemic will still be with us. How can Jesus help us with our burdens, fears and griefs?

The word to pay attention in this reading is the word 'my'. Jesus says, "take *my* yoke upon you, and learn from me." Jesus offers a trade. We exchange carrying our own burden by ourselves for walking yoked with Jesus, sharing the load. This means letting go of our urge to try to control our situation and letting Jesus help. It means admitting we can't handle things on our own. Jesus offers rest from our personal burdens and then invites us to walk hitched with him, yoked together, letting him guide us along the path of God. By working together with Jesus, he promises we will find rest for our souls and a burden that is light.

Let's take a moment to remember what God's path looks like. At its very basic level the path God invites us to walk is to love God, love our neighbour and love ourselves. That is the path we walk when we yoke ourselves to Christ. How does this help us cope with COVID 19?

On the rough days, when the realities of COVID 19 overwhelms us, it means loving ourselves. For me, it means being gentle with myself and accepting that I am not going to be as productive as I had hoped. The dusting, the phone calls, the shopping all have to wait till I'm having a better day. It may mean some tears, or a racing, anxious heart, or a bone deep weariness or all three. What does it mean for you? However a bad day expresses itself for you, accept it. We all have them. Be gentle with yourself. It doesn't mean we are weak; it means we are human.

When the inevitable bad day comes along for me, I try to concentrate on doing the things I know will help me – walking, meditating, colouring, reading, praying, listening to music. Your list of helpful practices will be different from mine. If you don't have a list, I encourage you to take time to make one when you are having a good day so you are ready for the next bad day.

If the day is so bad you can't rouse the energy for doing anything on your list of helpful practices, just be. It will pass. There will be better days. Remember you are loved, deeply and always by our Creator each and every moment of our lives. There is no earning that. We are loved, period.

This pandemic has increased our collective baseline stress level. This means we have less capacity to deal with those extra stressors along the way and, for most of us, that means there will be more bad days than we are used to. If the bad days begin to outnumber the good days or if the bad days are unbearable, please reach out for help. You can always call or text me. Send me an email at pastoralcare@sduc.ca or call Chantal to get my phone number. There are extra mental health resources available these days. The Alberta government website - COVID-19 info for Albertans – has a Get Help section if you scroll down the page. Under the Mental Health and Addictions tab, there are several numbers you can call. If you need help, please reach out. Ask someone to help you get the help you need. This is not a sign of weakness. It is a way to love yourself and keep yourself healthy. It is a good thing. Love yourself.

Thankfully, not all our days will be rough ones. On better days, when we feel more like ourselves and we have some energy to share, being yoked with Jesus means loving our neighbour. In his message, Unforced Rhythms of Grace, Rev. Gary Hilton says:

Sometimes we allow ourselves to be distracted and led by the worries and troubles of this world and very quickly lose sight of God's work. ... Christ is calling us to follow him in the "unforced rhythms of grace;" living in tune with God's will, recognizing God at work each day, and serving others in simple ministry.

There are simple things we can all do to make our community more loving and just in these times. We are God's hands, called to reach out in love and compassion to our neighbours.

Is there someone you know who is living alone and may be feeling isolated and lonely that you can call? I know someone in our congregation spends her Sunday afternoons flipping through our church directory, looking to see if there is someone she hasn't heard from in a while and giving them a call. It is a simple way to stay connected and brighten someone's day. Is there a charity that is helping those short on funds for the necessities of life that you can support? Is there something you can do to address racism, homophobia, and all the other destructive forces that are rampant in our world these days? Living in tune with God's will means looking out at our world with curiosity and compassion to see where we can help.

Pray as you walk in your neighbourhood or as you watch the news. Each simple action we take to make our world a more loving place allows God's grace to be known. The unforced rhythm of grace wraps round us when we train ourselves to watch for ways we can help. Notice the places where you can do a simple thing to help, do that simple thing and then feel the love of God expand within you and move out from you into the world. You become part of God's rhythm of love and justice, God's rhythm of grace. Love your neighbour.

Finally, being yoked with Jesus means to love God. Make time and space every day for God. This is the single most helpful thing we can do for ourselves, for our world and for our God. In the morning, look out the window and thank God for the beauty of the day. Notice the details – what does the sky look like, what new flowers are blooming? Is the grass wet? Take a moment to centre yourself and feel connected to the Holy. Breathe in peace, breathe out gratitude. Make space for God in the morning.

Talk with God throughout the day. Pay attention to your feelings and share them with God. When you pass someone on the street or in the hallway, pray that they know love. When you sit down to lunch, say thanks. When you feel threatened or weak, ask for strength. Notice the awesome beauty of the little things. My son likes to watch the ants at work when he is feeling anxious. It grounds him and connects him to awe and peace. The little things are available each and every day by the grace of God. Make it a habit to include God in your day and God will be your companion on the journey of life.

Finally, end your day in prayer. I start with gratitude – what are at least three specific things I am grateful for today. Then I move into giving over to God the concerns I am carrying and ask God to hold each concern in strength and love through the night. Find a prayer rhythm that works for you to end your day with. Love God.

Walking yoked with Jesus means loving ourselves, loving our neighbour and loving God. Simply knowing we are not alone makes the world a friendlier, more caring place. We broaden our perspective beyond ourselves. We notice that we live in God and God lives in us. When we walk yoked to Jesus through each day, sharing our burdens and lightening the burdens of others along the way, we will find rest for our souls.

In these pandemic times, sticking to the basics of faith will help us through. The rhythm of loving ourselves, loving our neighbour and loving God will make the burdens lighter and more bearable. It will bring glimpses of joy and wonder into our days. It will make our world a more loving and just place. Practice sharing the load with Jesus each and every day and we can make it through. We are not alone, thanks be to God!