



“Rest for the Soul”
Scripture – Matthew 11:1-30
Sermon preached by Jill Getty
Sunday, July 5, 2020

When we first read the verses in Matthew chapter 11, we might wonder why Jesus’ words are so piercing for the first twenty-seven verses of this chapter, but then Jesus ends the chapter with the last three verses telling us that all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens can come to him and he will give us rest. Several questions came to mind as we read this chapter:

Why is John the Baptist stumped about who Jesus is when John is the one who baptized Jesus in the wilderness and said that he was not worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals?

Why does Jesus give John the Baptist such incredible praise yet in the midst of that praise proclaim that “...no one is greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John.”

Why does Jesus say the Kingdom of Heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force?

Why does Jesus scold the cities he has been ministering in and basically tell them they are in real trouble when the Day of Judgment comes?

And why is Jesus happy that a portion of the population has not been able to understand his teachings up to this point?

What makes Jesus’ yoke easy to wear and why would anyone concede to wearing a yoke, even if it was easy to wear?

Why does Jesus say all these things and then tell us that all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens can come to him and find rest?

When reading this chapter, the only likable verse seems to be verse 28. The chapter seems to be congested with negativity. The only portion of the chapter that was pleasing was the verse that offered comfortable rest. But the thought occurred: there has to be a reason this beautifully soothing verse is at the end of these disturbing verses. Somehow they make a whole unit. John the Baptist, who was in prison at the time for offending Herod with his confrontational preaching, was confused about whether Jesus was actually the Messiah or not. John had baptized Jesus and seemed to expect Jesus to be more militant and have the capability to overthrow the Roman oppression of the Jews. However, John had heard from prison that Jesus was bringing healing to the deaf, blind, lame and sick; raising the dead and preaching good news to the poor. John the Baptist wondered if this is what the Messiah

was really supposed to be doing – that is why John sent his own disciples to Jesus to make sure that what he was hearing was actually true and to ask Jesus if he was the Messiah they have been waiting for or not.

It is an earnest and heartfelt question. Jesus tells the disciples the answer that John already knows and has heard about – that he is healing, raising people from the dead and preaching good news to poor people. John must have been wondering why Jesus had not been more militant – why all the healings and not a bold military stand? Surely they would not be able to overcome Roman oppression without the use of some violence. Indeed, it was hard for John the Baptist to understand how evil oppression could be overcome with healing people and preaching good news. The truthful and yet condemning preaching of John the Baptist which told people to repent for the Kingdom of God was coming was indeed what paved the pathway for Jesus' ministry.

The prophets often had harsh messages for their society to penetrate the hardness of the heart so that spiritual healing could begin. And John the Baptist was definitely a prophet who preached for people to change the way they lived. John's preaching opened and prepared the hearts of the multitudes to hear Jesus preach the good news and heal the sick. If you have a bad wound, the first the thing you have to do is cleanse the wound before the healing process can begin. Such cleansing in the people's lives was what John the Baptist did to make them more receptive to Christ's preaching and healing. Verse 12 in our scriptures says that "from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force." There are those who live to administer violence. That statement is a reference to the fact that John has been imprisoned because of his preaching. The prophets before John were also mistreated and killed by their own people and religious leaders. And John the Baptist himself was beheaded soon after this story. This verse is also an allusion to Jesus' death – for Jesus represents the kingdom of heaven. And he came healing and preaching good news but those who hated him took him by force and crucified him. Jesus knew that the religious leaders of his day, were jealous of leaders like John and himself who were different from them; perceived as more powerful than they were or had a greater following than they did.¹

Therefore, the religious leaders made up lies about John and Jesus saying that John was a demon because of his aesthetic lifestyle in which he refused to drink alcoholic beverages or eat certain foods. Those same religious leaders said Jesus was a glutton and drunkard because he ate and drank with certain kinds of people they considered undesirable. Violent people are like this. They make up lies, destroy reputations, call people unwholesome names, and ignite crowds to kill and destroy. That is what some of the religious leaders and people of Jesus day were doing. Jesus was the personification of the Kingdom of Heaven and he was a healer in the midst of his people, many of whom were rude, insulting and violent to him, his disciples and his followers. In verse 20 of Matthew 11, Jesus begins to rebuke cities where he has been preaching and healing for the majority of his ministry. Jesus taught in those places and did numerous miracles in those cities. However, many people in those cities did not seem to change their behavior or their attitude. They remained unchanged and complacent. And because of that, Jesus told them that judgment was bound to come upon them.² People are often given opportunities in life; the chance to make a positive change and yet they remain the same or worse. The judgment that comes to them is often a natural consequences of their unchanged circumstance or lifestyle behavior.

And lastly in these verses from Matthew, Jesus thanks God that God has hidden spiritual revelations from those that the world considers to be wise and intelligent. And then Jesus thanks God for revealing spiritual knowledge to those who are like babies and who are not considered to be wise or intelligent. Those who are violent; those who refuse to change their behavior; those who tear apart others and often see themselves as superior, wise and intelligent often think they are living enlightened lives and believe that others are beneath them. They are the ones Jesus is speaking about when he thanks God that spiritual truth has been hidden from them. And the reason it has been hidden from them is because they are hard of heart and not open to the truth anyway. It is those who are humble; seek to be peaceable; who have faith in a higher and greater power than themselves; who realize they may know a lot but are aware they still have a lot to learn – those are the ones who have not hardened their hearts

to God or humanity. Their hearts are willing to change when needed; their minds are open to growth and they are humble enough to receive God's spiritual truths and wisdom.³

Hacksaw Ridge is based on a true story made into a movie which takes the spectator to a level of raw suffering and pain that is nearly unimaginable in its scenes of war. Desmond Doss enlisted into the Army Medical Corp during World War II to serve his country. However, he did not believe in using guns. He was willing to do all the other grueling training alongside the other soldiers, but he refused to carry a gun into war. Of course, he was the laughing stock of his unit because of his pacifist stance and he was given beatings by his comrades because he was considered to be a coward. The allies were fighting to defeat the communist enemy that was ready to invade the world and oppress the Jews and any who would stand with them. The month-long campaign of the Battle of Okinawa was a place of extreme violence where the allies sacrificed blood and life. One would think there would be no healing that could come from such gut wrenching violence and deathly struggles. At one point during the battle, the soldiers were driven back down the escarpment leaving many injured soldiers at the top of the cliff with no help and no way of escape.

However, over the course of several hours, this single unarmed soldier, Desmond Doss, came to the rescue of many lives on that ridge during that battle. Enemy fire was heavy and many soldiers were wounded, trapped and stranded on the ridge waiting for certain death. But Doss prayed to God asking God to help him save as many as he could. Doss went back into the fray of combat over and over throughout the day and into the night with no gun – only a prayer that God would help him save just one more person.⁴ Each time Doss saved a wounded soldier on that ridge; he would pray again for God to give him the strength to go back into the blazing battle saying, “let me get just one more” and he would run back into the fire. Desmond Doss single handedly rescued 75 men during that battle who were otherwise destined to be left on that ridge to die. He became the hero in his unit and the first conscientious objector to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor.⁵

Maybe we can understand a little better why Jesus told his followers at the end of the chapter eleven: “Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” It is because we are in a perpetual state of spiritual warfare. There is something always brewing that we must battle. There are injustices in our communities; there are poor who are ignored.

Jesus has said that the person we consider to be the least among us is actually himself and whenever we walk along side or assist one who is considered to be the least among us we have actually walked along Jesus himself. There are many among us who are carrying the burdens of illness, disease, poverty, discrimination, and the scars of abuse. And there are many among us that seek to walk alongside our sisters and brothers who find themselves in these circumstances. And the road to transformation and healing is weary, long and tiring. Jesus is saying “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

- Come to me all you who labor for justice and righteous causes
- Come to me all you who are sick of the lies your leaders tell you
- Come to me all of you who are weary of the way people are oppressed, violated, downtrodden and made to feel like second class citizens
- Come to me all of you who are tired of being enslaved to addictions
- Come to me all of you are tired of debasing violent behaviors and slanderous remarks
- Come to me all of you who want justice and peace for the whole world
- Come to me all of you who know that all people are created by God

Come to me and leave the violent leaders; leave the violent people; leave the squalor of hatred and evil; leave the complacency of injustice; leave the violent enemies that destroy the soul. Leave them behind in the dust. Rest for our souls is in the hands of Jesus for he understands our weariness in this multifaceted world of confusion and strife. Jesus says that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. “A yoke is a wooden bar or frame that joins two

animals together so they can carry a heavy load.”⁶ Jesus teams up with us to help us carry the load of life; to walk with us in this constant barrage of needing to overcome persistent evil. Jesus is our life partner and teams with us to navigate the pitfalls of life. Jesus is calling us to come to him and allow him to share the load with us. We do not need to walk this road alone. Come; bring God your burdens and find rest for your soul.

NOTES

1. Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading, The Bible and Liberation Series*, Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 2000, Fourth Printing 2005, pp. 249-253.
2. Ibid, pp. 255-256.
3. David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary On the First Gospel*, Crossroad Publishing Company: New York, New York, 1993, pp.130-132.
4. Katie Lange, “Pfc. Desmond Doss: The unlikely hero behind 'Hacksaw Ridge,’” DoD News, Defense Media Activity, February 28, 2017, accessed on July 3, 2020, https://www.army.mil/article/183328/pfc_desmond_doss_the_unlikely_hero_behind_hacksaw_ridge
5. *Hacksaw Ridge*, Directed by Mel Gibson, Cosmos Filmed Entertainment, 2016.
6. Shelley D. Best, “Matthew 11:25-30: Homiletical Perspective,” *Feasting on The Gospels Matthew, Vol. 1, Chapters 1-13*, ed. Cynthia Jarvis, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky, 2013, p. 299.

Prayers of the People ~ Chesna Hinkley

Our Heavenly Father,

We praise and adore you for your mercy, your grace, your power and glory and unending faithfulness. We join with the angels and the great cloud of witnesses past, present, and future to lift up your name in honor and worship, and to proclaim your greatness in all ages and throughout all creation.

We thank you, gracious God, for welcoming the downtrodden; for welcoming the outcast; for welcoming sinners; for welcoming the prodigal; for welcoming us. We thank you for reaching into our bruised and doubting souls with the balm of rest; with the undeserved gift of faith; and with mercies that are new every morning.

This morning we ask for comfort for those among us who grieve. We pray for the families and loved ones of those who have died, and ask for them hope and the mercy of remembrance and renewal. We lift up to you those who grieve relationships: suffering friendships, painful families, marriages that feel hopeless. Your friendship with us is a reconciled one and so we have hope and we pray for help, for softened hearts, for good counsel, and for rekindled and reimagined love.

We pray for those among us and throughout the world who are sick, and especially ask that you would have mercy on our world as we fight COVID-19. Make us wise, raise up wise leaders and creative scientists and fill us with a true desire to cooperate for the good of the whole world. We ask you to pour out great blessings on our healthcare, household, and grocery workers and protect their families. We pray for the global economy and all who find themselves without jobs or without homes. Preserve us from becoming complacent.

We give you thanks, Lord, for our new director of music and his husband. We thank you for the search team and their work. We ask for your blessing on Tony’s ministry here, that you would keep him faithful to the calling you have laid on his life, that you would guide him in wisdom as he leads us in our own highest calling, to worship and glorify our God. We pray that Tony and Ted will be happy here.

On this weekend, God, we thank you for our country and the many gifts it gives us. We thank you for the right to vote, and in this hundredth anniversary year we lift up special praise for the women’s suffrage movement and its brave leaders who loved this country. We thank you for freedom to speak and to worship. There is much to be thankful for but much to lament, and we pray for justice. We ask forgiveness for our complicity in the racism that plagues this country. We come to you longing for the change only you can effect and we cry out in pain for our

siblings who are dead at the hands of police. Give justice and rest to those who live in fear and make us faithful mourners with all those who mourn.

You, Christ our Redeemer, have defeated the powers of Sin and Death at work in this world and we praise you that though in this world we will have trouble, you tell us to take heart, for you have overcome it. Even this great sin of racism, which demands such unfathomable atonement, is crushed under the foot of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and we praise you for it. In your mercy, Holy Spirit, make us better in response. As the world seems to crumble around us we pray that the new world would shine through the cracks, the world you are bringing about and bringing back to life, the world in which all things will be made new. On that sure and certain hope of the resurrection we stake our claim, trusting in Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray, saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.