

Title: "Invitation To Rest"

Text: Matthew 11:28-30

Is there anyone here feeling "weary and heavy laden" this morning?

-How does Jesus' invitation to rest sound? Pretty enticing?

I have been talking to a lot of 'weary and heavy laden' people in recent weeks.

-Some of you right here in our congregation;

-also pastors at the 4C Annual Gathering,

-a woman who serves on the Board of the Davenport Home with me who has had complications with eye surgery this summer and is so discouraged.

-a parent that I talked to on Friday night at VBS closing program,

-and some of the kids who were with us this week, too.

Not to mention the weariness that all of us who were working at the VBS this week felt yesterday and today.

-By Friday I was exhausted, weary and worn out.

-I am not as young as I used to be!

But it's not the weariness that comes from a good week of working with kids that makes us feel 'heavy laden,' is it?

-In fact, the weariness that comes from doing good work is not a bad thing. It can be quite satisfying.

-And a day off and a couple of good night's sleep can cure that kind of weariness pretty well.

But the kind of weariness that makes one feel "heavy laden" is of a different order.

-It's the weariness that comes with discouragement, with a sense of hopelessness.

-It's a weariness that comes from carrying burdens on our heart that are overwhelming to us.

It's the weariness we feel reading or watching the newsfeeds everyday.

-The constant conflicts everywhere.

-The constant killings.

-The constant bombings.

-The constant bickering and in-fighting in Washington.

It's the weariness we feel with the dysfunction in our own families,

-and our seeming inability to do anything about it.

-We have a hard time working with our own dysfunctions, much less fixing anyone else's around us.

And then there's the weariness that comes from the tension and anxiety that is in us and all around us all the time.

-We are worried about so many things, so many people, so many responsibilities, so many "to do's" on our "to do list."

-We are worried about someone being mad at us for something we said.

-We're worried about our kids, our spouses, our parents, our grandparents.

-We're worried about our "singleness," or our marriage.

-We're worried about our job, or our lack of a job.

Our daughter Rebekah got engaged, and we are all excited about it,

-except now we are worrying about when and where and all the details!

I mean, what aren't we worried about?

-It's all of that worrying that makes us "weary and heavy laden."

-And so when Jesus invites us, "Come to me all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest,"

-it sounds like music to our ears, doesn't it?

-it sounds like exactly what we need and want.

-it sounds like I am finally going to get a good nap,

-I mean a really good nap where I wake up feeling refreshed and rested.

But here's the thing that struck me this week as I was meditating on this invitation from Jesus.

-It's not a nap that Jesus is offering us here.

-He actually wants to change our whole lives.

Because it is the next thing Jesus says that points us toward the rest that he is inviting us to.

“Take my yoke upon you,” Jesus says, “and learn of me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

You see, the rest that Jesus is inviting us to experience in him -is not a “bodily rest” that a good nap can cure.

He is talking about a rest for our soul.

-And the key to finding that kind of rest comes by taking off the burdensome yoke we have been wearing,  
-which has worn us out,  
-and putting on a new yoke which we will surprisingly find to be easy and light.

What is this yoke he is talking about?

-Well, a literal yoke is the harness that oxen or plough horses have around their necks that binds them to the plough they are dragging along behind them, right?  
-But figuratively, a yoke then became an image for any kind of bondage or slavery.  
-A person is “yoked” to whatever enslaves them.  
-In Galatians, the Apostle Paul tells us we are free in Christ and should no longer subject ourselves to the yoke of slavery.

But in Jesus’ day, a yoke also had another connotation.

-In Jesus’ day they spoke of the “yoke of a Rabbi.”  
-A Rabbi was a teacher of the Law, and a Rabbi’s ‘yoke’ was their teaching and interpretation of how to understand and live out the teaching of the law.

And so student who apprenticed himself to a certain rabbi to be his disciple was said to be “taking on the yoke of the rabbi.”

-That meant, he was harnessing himself to that Rabbi’s teaching and that Rabbi’s way of life.  
-He was giving up his own way of life, and committing himself to know what the Rabbi knew, and do what the Rabbi did and live like the Rabbi lived.

So when Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me," he is inviting his hearers to become his disciples

-and change their whole lives.

-He is inviting them to take off the old yokes, the old ways of living they were accustomed to,

-and to put on His new way of life.

-He was inviting them to become like him, and to learn to think, and to understand, and to live and to love like he did.

And he says that involves taking off the old yoke of our former way of living,

-and put on a new yoke.

It's not just a nap Jesus is offering us, it's a whole new way of life.

-But he promises that his new way of life will somehow be "restful" like his was.

-That wouldn't mean we would be lounging around in hammocks all days, calling for another lemonade from the cabana boy.

No, Jesus' life wasn't like that.

-His life had work and stress.

-He faced opposition and criticism.

-He was acquainted with sorrow and familiar with grief.

But he was somehow gentle in spirit, lowly in heart as he says here,

-and he found his rest in God His Father.

That's what He wants to teach me....and you.

-He wants to teach us a whole new way of life, in which (as we sung from Psalm 62 a moment ago)

"our souls find rest in God alone."

And what would that look like?

-Well, how many of you remember the movie "Chariots of Fire" from back in the 1980's?

-It's a great movie, and if you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it.

It's based on the true story of Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams,

-who were both British runners who qualified for England's Olympic track and field team back in the 1924 Olympics.

But they had very different lifestyles and very different motivations for running and for competing.

Eric Liddell was a devoted Christian, and he believed that running was an experience of who he was in God.

-In the movie, he tells his sister, "I believe God made me for a purpose...but he also made me fast, and when I run I feel God's pleasure."

You see, his core identity was centered in a relationship with God,

-and his running was simply a response to the way God had created him, and it was an act of delighting in God,

-and experiencing God's pleasure in Him, God's creation.

But Harold Abrahams was not attuned to all of that.

-He was running to prove himself, and to prove his worth to all of his peers in the British "old boys network."

-He was driven to succeed, and he hoped that winning a medal at the Olympics would open up to him all the doors to privilege and power in Britain's aristocracy.

In the movie, a fellow runner from that aristocracy, Lord Andrew Lindsay says, "Think what winning means to a man like Harold. For Harold it's a matter of life and death."

So for him, you see, there was no rest for his soul in running.

-The endorphins weren't kicking in as he ran,

-because there was constant pressure he felt to succeed.

-Just before his Olympic race he confesses to a friend, "In one hours time I'll be out there...with ten lonely seconds to justify my whole existence."

It was the story of his whole life. Life was a race, and everything boiled down not only to winning, but to what people would think of you based on what you accomplished or failed to accomplish.

He was weary and heavy laden.

But here's what happened:

-At the Olympics, the qualifying heat for Eric Liddel's race was scheduled to be held on a Sunday.

-And in those days, keeping the Sabbath holy was a much bigger deal for devoted Christians than we make of it today.

-And Eric Liddell told his team he couldn't compete on the Sabbath.

-They were incredulous. They tried to persuade him otherwise.

-But he was going to keep the Sabbath holy and take his day of rest,

-even though it meant being disqualified for his Olympic race.

And what I want us to see, is the freedom and the rest upon which his life was based.

-He was free to run in the competition, or not run.

-His life did not depend on it one way or the other.

-He ran because he felt God's pleasure, not because he needed to justify his existence.

-And so for him the burden was easy and the yoke was light.

And seeing this, that same Lord Andrew Lindsay, who was another runner who had already won a silver medal,

-he offered Eric Liddell his place in the 400 meter race, which was not run on a Sunday.

-And Eric Liddell accepted the offer, and ran and won a gold medal.

It's a great movie, and Harold Abrahams wins a medal, too.

-It's not that the Christian wins, and the other guy doesn't.

-No, in this case they both win, but it's what under the surface of their lives that I am getting at today.

So much of what burdens us and makes us feel weary and heavy laden is that our whole lifestyle is more like Harold Abrahams' than Eric Liddell's.

- We are trying to prove ourselves, trying to measure up to the expectations of others, trying to prove our lives meaningful, trying to get ahead, to make things work, to right the wrongs and fix the people around us.
- And we are afraid of disappointing someone, or of disappointing God.

But Jesus says, "Come to me with all of that. It's a yoke I never asked you to bear.

- And if you'll let me, I'll help you take it off.
- And then we'll put a new yoke on you which you'll find will fit you perfectly.
- It's my yoke, and it is tailored and contoured just for you.
- And it's a dual yoke, so that you are harnessed in one side,
- and guess what, I am harnessed in on the other side.
- So I am carrying it with you.
- And you will find my yoke is easy, and the burden is light.

And you will be able to not just plod along, but to "run and feel God's pleasure."

It's a whole different way of life I am inviting you to.

- My friends, I am trying to learn this way of life myself.
- Because I am a Harold Abrahams in my life, far more than an Eric Liddell.
- I feel a constant need to justify my existence by taking care of people, taking care of tasks, doing things that need to be done.
- And at the root of my motivation is quite often a fear that someone will be disappointed in me if I don't take care of everything.
- That people will discover that I was not adequate for the tasks I was given.
- That God will one day say, "Paul, you didn't really measure up."

And so you see, my identity is not so secure in God, and in his love for me in Christ.

- I am still trying to earn it, even though I don't believe in earning it.

- But what I believe about the Gospel still has a hard time penetrating into my heart and soul.
- There are these yokes that I wear that are deeply ingrained in me.

So taking on Jesus' yoke is a daily part of my discipleship.  
-It's not a one-time decision, it's a daily choice to find my rest in God alone,  
-and to trust that Jesus is yoked to me, and that the real burdens of life and death, of sin and salvation  
-he is carrying the weight of.

But that trust is truly liberating.

-The weight comes off, and the rest for my soul comes in.

Let's pray.