

THE BURDEN OF THEM IS INTOLERABLE

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Jesus said, “*Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon me, 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. (Matthew 11:28-30)*

If you go up to Union Square you will see, of course, the great statue of George Washington. But if you look around for a bit you will also find a statue of Abraham Lincoln, one of Lafayette, and since 1986, a statue of Mohandas Gandhi. Whenever I see the statue of Gandhi, I recall a scene from his life portrayed in the 1982 biographical movie. Gandhi, as you know, was the Hindu leader of India’s struggle to throw off British colonial rule. After World War Two an exhausted British Empire finally granted the Indian people their independence, but the country soon fell into horrific strife along religious lines. Hindus and Muslims were killing each other on the streets, and Gandhi responded with a hunger strike that he would continue until the violence stopped.

At one point in his hunger strike, a distressed Hindu man came to Gandhi, confessing that he and his family had been caught up in the violence. The Muslims had killed his young son, and in retaliation, the man had killed a Muslim child. “I smashed his head against the wall ... I am going to hell,” said the man, overwhelmed by the burden of his own guilt. Gandhi told the man that he knew a way out of hell. The Hindu man should go out into the street, find an orphaned Muslim boy whom no one wanted, take the child into his home, raise him as his own son until he is fully grown, but raise him as a Muslim. In the film the Hindu man is stunned, and breaks down sobbing, unsure which one is the more intolerable burden to bear: his own guilt, or the price he would have to pay to atone for his guilt.

Jesus said, *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* Gandhi’s encounter with the guilt-stricken Hindu man is purportedly true. But even if the moment didn’t occur exactly as Hollywood depicted it, the scene has probably played itself out in reality countless thousands of times in the long, bloody history of humankind: an impulsive revenge killing, followed by crushing guilt. Some people, especially those drawn into hate crimes here in America, or currently caught up in war-torn Syria and Iraq, will indeed stagger under such heavy burdens. Others, like those of us here, I pray, have had lighter loads to shoulder. Nevertheless, whatever the weight of whatever burden you are trying to carry, today we’ve heard the gracious invitation of Jesus, who says, *let me carry it for you.* Imagine: all the baggage that sin, the world, the devil, and we ourselves pile onto our shoulders, Jesus offers to take.

The first questions you might want to ask are, who is this Jesus who offers to carry our heavy burdens, and is he indeed able to lift them? In today’s reading from Matthew, Jesus speaks of his credentials: *All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.* In these words about his unique relationship with God, Jesus seems to be saying this: if he is able to bear all that God has handed over to him, then certainly he is able to handle all that you can give him as well. The One who offers to help is indeed able to give help.

Do you want his help? Sometimes we think that great merit is involved in carrying our own heavy burdens. The rugged individual who neither needs nor asks for anyone's assistance has always been an attractive figure in the American psyche. But the stern, silent type who claims to need no help is a model for mental illness, not mental health. People do terrible things to themselves and to others when they live under the crushing weights of guilt, grief, and anger: three intolerable burdens that Jesus offers to bear for us, by the way. In the next few moments I'd like to paint a thumbnail sketch of each of them, roughly, with a very broad brush: guilt, grief, and anger.

First, the heavy burden of guilt. Innumerable people walk through every day with the millstone of guilt around their necks. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done. What is worse, we cannot undo the past, and the memory of our own hurtful deeds can return to haunt the guilty soul. Here is a woman – a good person – who attends her 20th high school reunion. Over drinks and dinner she reconnects with old friends and they remember their adventures. They remember one period that involved some relentless bullying of another girl, who in earlier grades had been their friend. The bullied girl had eventually moved away before graduation, and no one knew what became of her. “It was just high school stuff,” says one friend. But the woman remembers that she and her posse had taken the mean-girl act to new levels of cruelty. In fact, she'd been party to making her former friend's life a living hell. All these years later the woman is grieved to recall what she did. She wants to apologize, but how? Once back home she tries to discover whatever might have become of the bullied girl, but she can find no trace of her, not even on the internet. Was she still living at all? Suddenly for the woman, the burden of her guilt is intolerable. To quote an old phrase from The Book of Common Prayer (p. 331) concerning our sins: *The remembrance of them is grievous unto us, the burden of them is intolerable.* What is the way out of hell?

In today's reading from Romans (7:21-8:6), St. Paul, himself complicit in a murder, writes about his own ongoing burden of guilt: *I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand ... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?* But then he goes on to write: *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! There is, therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* Paul is reflecting on what has been the experience of millions: that when you come to Jesus you find in him and his cross the forgiveness of your sins, the release from guilt, and the unburdening of crippling remorse. *As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us,* says the Psalmist (103:12).

Second, the intolerable burden of grief. What could be more devastating than to hear the word “dead” pronounced over one whom you love? For many people, the loss of a beloved triggers the unraveling of their lives. To be sure, you try to soldier on, playing along that you're “doing just great” and “moving on,” and “having a nice day,” as the world insists you do even before the grass grows green over the grave. On your back, however, is an emptiness of unbearable weight. Grief is an emptiness of unbearable weight that allows no rest for the one trying to shoulder it. But Jesus said, *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* What do we find when we come to Jesus? We find the promise of eternal life. His mighty resurrection demonstrates to us that death is not the last word in life. When our mortal bodies lie in death, life is changed, not ended. Likewise our relationships with those we love and see no more are changed, not ended. We have a reasonable and holy hope, and a joyful expectation of eternal life with our departed loved ones. So grief is a second heavy burden that Christ, over time, can carry.

Third and finally, the burden of anger. Anger is perhaps the most disfiguring and fatiguing of all the weights we try to carry through life. When someone hates us or harms us in any way, our tendency can be to ball up the grievance and roll it along with us wherever we go. Concerning

anger, sometimes we resemble a member of the insect family called *Scarabaeoidea*, otherwise known as the Scarab beetle, otherwise known as the dung beetle. What dung beetles do is find a pile of animal manure, roll up a little ball of it, and push it along wherever they go, spreading it everywhere, feeding off it, raising their young in it. We do the same thing with anger. I'm told that dung beetles perform a useful ecological function. We should leave such work to them. For us, anger is exhausting and corrosive.

I know: letting go of your anger is easier said than done. How does Jesus relieve us from carrying the burden of anger? Perhaps his promise of a great Day of Judgment, when all the hidden hurts of human history will be revealed and addressed, can help us begin to release our grip on the grievances we carry. All unrepentant workers of iniquity will be caught in the spotlight of God's justice. If you've been handed a ball of dung, know that your adversary will one day stand before the judgment seat of God. *Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord (Romans 12:19)*. But know this as well; write this down; be careful: you, too, will undergo the searching judgment of God. It's no wonder that Jesus said, *if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift (Matthew 5:23)*. Wise words for people burdened with anger. Wise words for all of us.

So those are three heavy weights our Lord offers to carry for us: anger, grief, and guilt. How do we turn them over? What does Jesus really mean when he says *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me?* What he offers us is not a new set of teachings to master, not more laws to follow, not more rules to obey. These tend only to increase the load, not lighten it. Likewise, what Jesus has to offer is not merely inaccessible church jargon, or even worse: vague, mystic, spiritual psycho-babble. Instead, what Jesus offers us by the power of the Spirit is his living presence and constant companionship. The Communion we share is to remind us and renew within us what we too-often forget: that he lives in us and we in him, that we can do all things in him who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). Thus when anger threatens to consume us, when grief overwhelms us, when guilt accuses us day and night, we can say to the Lord who lives, "this burden is intolerable; please carry it for me." Remember that you make this request not to an imaginary friend, but to the living Jesus. And if the world hands you back your burden thirty seconds after Christ has taken it from you, say to the Lord again, "this burden is intolerable; please carry it for me." And he will. It's been my experience and delight again and again that the invitation of Jesus is not just a future promise by and by, but a present reality in the here and now. He truly does provide rest for your soul.

I've come across an old story about a little boy who was helping his father with some yard work. The man asked the boy to clear some rocks from one part of the yard, and the boy eagerly began the task. Soon he came upon a large rock half buried in the ground that was too heavy to move. The boy heaved and tugged with all of his strength, but was unable to budge the rock. "I can't do it," he confessed to his father. The man asked the boy, "Did you use all of your strength?" The boy, visibly spent with perspiration running down his face, looked hurt and replied, "yes I did; I used every bit of strength I have." The man smiled and said, "No you didn't; you didn't ask me to help." Then the two of them walked over, and together pulled the rock out of the dirt.

What about the intolerable burdens you are trying to carry? Are you using every ounce of strength you have at your disposal? Are you asking the Lord for help? Hear again the words of Jesus, who says to us, *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.*