

WHEN THE BURDEN 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)*

I have been a parish priest for over thirty years now, and in that time have walked with countless people trying to carry heavy burdens. I think of one church member who could never forgive himself for what he judged to be his failure as a husband. Leigh was a man in his early seventies, semi-retired from a long career in finance. He'd had a talent for picking the right stocks, selling them at the right time, and making money hand over fist. His wife, Dotty, was the head nurse on the cancer unit of a hospital. Dotty was devoted to Leigh, and because they never had any children, she could be as committed to her career as Leigh was to his. But at length she began to talk to Leigh about retirement. The time had come to build the dream house in Florida they had always wanted.

Leigh put off retirement year after year and continued to pour himself into his work, making more money than they could ever spend. Dotty swallowed her disappointment and pressed on with her work until she fell seriously ill with cancer, and became a patient in the very hospital ward she had run. She died within a year of her diagnosis, never to enjoy a day of retirement. Dotty's death devastated Leigh. With sudden clarity he realized what a fool he'd been to neglect his wife's wishes. But he could do nothing to atone for his sins of omission. No amount of drinking could assuage his guilt. Large gifts to the hospital and the church in her name did not bring her back.

Finally, Leigh built the house in Florida to Dotty's exact specifications, hoping against hope that her spirit would come and ease his pain. When he moved in he felt only a more profound sense of her absence. He had built it, but she did not come. Sadly, Leigh concluded that the only way out of his hell was to take his own life. The burden of his guilt was intolerable.

Jesus said, *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we've heard the gracious, spectacular invitation of Jesus. Whatever the weight of whatever burden you are trying to carry, what he says is this: *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 Gospel passage he 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 bear all things you can give him. 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. My old friend Leigh was hardly alone under the weight of guilt. Innumerable people walk through every day with the same millstone 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 forever haunt the guilty soul. In the news recently I read the sad, sad saga of Juan Rodriguez, a Bronx father, husband, and social worker.¹ One hot day last summer Rodriguez was supposed to drop off his one-year old twins at daycare on his drive to work. On the way the twins fell asleep in their car seats, and Rodriguez forgot they were there. He arrived at work, parked in the sunny lot, and left the twins in the car, where they died some hours later in the sweltering heat. Rodriguez only discovered them when he was driving home at the end of the day. He was charged with manslaughter and criminally negligent homicide, but as of last week pled guilty to two misdemeanor charges and avoided prison time. Rodriguez can get on with life and even has the forgiveness of his wife. But will he ever forgive himself? 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 the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, 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!* And just a few lines beyond today's reading: *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 that on earth never achieve the perfection or permanence for which we long – these are changed, not ended. In the mystery we call the Communion of Saints, we have a reasonable and holy hope that the love stories we begin on earth continue in heaven. That which the time of this mortal life cuts short finds its fulfillment in the presence of God. Love is strong as death. Love never ends. 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. The nature of God is mercy and truth, compassion and righteousness. Thus, all unrepentant workers of iniquity will be caught in the spotlight of God's justice. Nobody gets away with anything. 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 and I, 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 burdens 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 give is not merely inaccessible church jargon, or even worse: vague, mystic, spiritual psycho-babble. Instead, what Jesus extends to us by the power of the Spirit is his living presence and constant companionship. The Communion we share today, even though impaired due to the pandemic, 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 your 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. Then, without the weight of sin and death on our shoulders, we become free to run with perseverance the race that is set before us through this troubled world.

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.²

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 Jesus 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.*

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¹ "Father Whose Infant Twins Died in Hot Car Avoids Prison After Guilty Plea," by Andrea Salcedo and Ed Shanahan. *The New York Times*, June 24, 2020.

² The story is attributed to Billy D. Strayhorn.