



Community
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

of Clarendon Hills

Individual, Pre-Meeting Devotion
January 2020
Theme: *Letting Go, Receiving Grace*

At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 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. 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.

Matthew 11:25-30

Introduction to Theme

While January and the turning of the calendar is a secular milestone, in many ways new year traditions reflect the good news of the Gospel. Fresh starts. New beginnings. A clean slate. As Paul explained, in Christ we are a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). Yet, while a new calendar year brings the promise and hope of a fresh start, we usually carry into it the same burdens, demands, and challenges we faced in the prior year. The message of our culture is that if we just read the right books, or listen to the right podcast, or try the right diet/training/financial/you-name-it plan, we'll have control over our lives and therefore, happiness.

And Jesus invites us to rest.

This invitation to rest, in the passage above, comes up at a curious time in Jesus' teaching. He had just been explaining to his new followers the demands of discipleship. As we know with the benefit of hindsight, serious demands would be placed upon these earliest followers, on top of all the demands of their ordinary lives, which were heavy with burden for this first century, poor community. So Jesus tells this weary audience to follow and face more demands, *and* find rest. It almost seems nonsensical. This way of suffering is also the place of rest. Rest for the soul, he says.

Get in the yoke with me, Jesus instructs, and learn a new way.

Clearly this *is* a new way! To find rest while in the midst of demanding lives is not only a new way, it's what we today long for, whether our burdens are from a frenetic pace of life managing work and family and volunteer commitments, or the 24/7 (bad) news, or burdens of grief and illness and loss. We struggle sometimes to imagine how we will rest. Is this one of those things hidden from the "wise and intelligent," as Jesus said, and instead revealed to infants? Infants, who by design are utterly dependent, don't have all the answers, and whose growth is inhibited without help and nurturing?

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Rest for our souls is not necessarily found in the elimination of the burdens we brought into the new year. Life will continue to include trials. Life will also include joys, and miracles, and *resurrection*. And through it all, our true rest is to be found when we become like infants again, letting go of our need to control and manage on our own to receive the grace of the Gentle and Humble One.

Self-help books and podcasts, plans and resolutions, have their place and can be useful. But what if, for a "fresh start" this year, we let go of the illusion of control and self-sufficiency? What if we release our tight grasp on figuring it all out, and get in the yoke with Jesus? Our Teacher and Redeemer promises the burden will be light. And you will find rest for your very soul.

Spiritual Practice

Jesus said, "Come to me." That is the first step toward this rest he promises. But sometimes giving up the struggle and opening our hands to God's way can feel like stepping off into the abyss.

Take a few minutes to ponder the words of Methodist pastor, Susan W. N. Ruach:



The yoke in ancient times referred to a device placed on the necks of animals to bind them together and control their actions, primarily for production. It later became a tool and symbol of the oppression of slaves. The yoke imagery in the Hebrew scriptures, while keeping the elements of relation and obedience, reflected a dramatic shift in meaning. Wearing the yoke of God was an honor and privilege, the yoke a symbol of joyful obedience. New Testament writers further developed the imagery, adding the discipleship element. Taking Jesus' yoke was to be with Jesus and learn his way of life, a way that includes gentleness and rest.

“A New Way of Struggling”

To struggle used to be
To grab with both hands
and shake
and twist
and turn
and push
and shove and not give in
But wrest an answer from it all
As Jacob did blessing.

But there is another way
To struggle with an issue, a question -
Simply to jump
off
into the abyss
and find ourselves
floating
falling
tumbling
being led
slowly and gently
but surely
to the answers God has for us -
to watch the answers unfold
before our eyes and still
to be part of the unfolding.
But, oh! the trust
necessary for this new way!
Not to be always reaching out
For the old hand-holds.

Reflection

Sometimes the place of greatest struggle is the place where we have the best opportunity be blessed with God’s grace.

Think about areas in your life that are depleting you, that you’re struggling with. How might these words give you encouragement to take a new approach? How might you let go and rest in Jesus? How might you release your grip so that you will be open to receive the grace that God promises?

Prayer

Lord God, Deliverer and Redeemer, Emmanuel. I know that your way is better than mine and I don't have all the answers, but sometimes when I can't see a way out I lose my grip on you and hold on to what I think I can control. Turn my eyes to you who never leave my side. Help me to let go of what is keeping me from experiencing your generous grace. Amen.