

THE GREAT INVITATION

INTRODUCTION The sermon this morning is something in the way of a quiet meditation upon some words which are to be found in the 11th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew:

"Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for my yoke is easy and my burden is light"

You've probably heard those words many, many times. And yet regardless of how many times you may have heard them or how familiar you are with them, they still nevertheless strike a responsive note within you. They cast a spell over you. Even before you know who said them or exactly what they mean, they do something to you. They lift you. These words, of course, are addressed to the tired and the weary. They're addressed to those who are tired not so much from the physical toil of life as from the tension of life. Tired of struggling and pressing, tired of working things out and making ends meet, tired of having to do the same old thing day after day. In other words, these words are addressed to most of us for more often than we would like to admit, we're loaded down with cares and problems. To be sure, we're not always in this mood, but there are times when we get to feeling this way.

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AN INVITATION FROM JESUS You'll notice that these words begin with an invitation. An invitation is an assurance that we are wanted; it's an indication that somebody wants us to be with him. In this case the invitation comes from Jesus. It has all of the depth and warmth of his sincere concern. There are times, are there not, when you and I receive invitations, and we know that the people do not really care as to whether we accept the invitation or not. Their invitation is nothing more than a formal and perfunctory sort of thing. But when an invitation comes from Jesus, you can be sure of this that it comes out of the depth of his concern for you as a human being. And if he had not meant it, he would never have said it in the first place. He was not one to speak glibly about such things.

And this too, coming from Him as it does it means even a great deal more than it appears to mean on the surface for in a way that's beyond our comprehension Jesus is revealing to us the concern and love of God. Therefore this invitation comes not only across the years from a young Jew living in Palestine, but it comes also from the very depths of all reality itself. It comes now and it comes from God.

"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for my yoke is easy and my burden is light".

There's a temptation to stop right here in order not to destroy the spell that these words cast. But in our predicament, we need more than just a magic spell. We need specific help - suggestions and directions, and we know that these words, like a great lyric, are never in danger from analysis. And so we look a little further into these words and as we do we find two suggestions growing out of them which may bring us some measure of help and encouragement.

TAKE MY YOKE UPON YOU

And Jesus said to them "Take my yoke upon you". What did he mean. To begin with we know that a yoke is what oxen wear when they are linked together for hard work. In other words, we could say that a yoke means work. It means labor, effort, responsibility, obligation. And what Jesus is proposing is an exchange of yokes. Take my yoke in place of yours. Now I have the feeling and I may be wrong, but I have the feeling that most of us would prefer to be free of all yokes, to be free from all responsibilities, obligations and efforts. At times we'd like to shake them off. Get rid of them. They chafe. They irritate. They wear us down and make us weary. What we would like is someone or something that would promise us if we were to come to him to show us how to get rid of all of the nagging responsibilities that we have to carry in life.

But this, as you know, is impossible and Jesus, I think, was wise enough to know it. A man who tries to free himself from all work and responsibility in life is apt to drift through life without any real accomplishment and I would imagine without any real deep and lasting joy. I know speaking out of my own personal experiences that there are times when I would like to get rid of all of the responsibilities and obligations I have as a minister and perhaps in the summer time in some far off place shake them all off and forget about them. But the strange thing is this that I've discovered that I'm never as happy inwardly, and never as well physically as when I'm carrying them. And I'm sure that if my wife were here she would say this too that I'm always much more difficult to get along with in the summer months while on vacation in a place where I'm able to forget about my work load.

Some of you may wonder as to what the difference was between their yoke and HIS yoke. And without going into technical questions that would take us far away from our main theme, it is fair I think to say that their yoke was the yoke of obedience. They were living under the requirements of a law and the law was a high and fine standard, and what they promised was obedience to it. But his yoke was, on the other hand, the yoke of allegiance. They were living under requirements, but he was living by response, by responding to the highest and the best he knew which was the love of God. And this he did voluntarily. What they were doing, they were doing because they had to. What he was doing, he was doing because he wanted to. Their yoke was the yoke of obedience; his was the yoke of allegiance. Their yoke was the yoke of law; his yoke, the yoke of love. And there's a great deal of difference!

Now I think you know these things without my having to say them to you, and yet I can't help but feel that it's good for us to be reminded of these things from time to time, to bring them to the surface of our conscious minds. It is true is it not that when you do something for the love of it or out of love for someone, the strain and effort is considerably less. It's cut in half. Let me illustrate what

I mean. It's a rather personal illustration and I hope you won't object to it. I hope it will help you to see the sort of thing I'm trying to express to you. My wife has been away for two and a half weeks spending some time in South Carolina with her parents. Of course whenever she goes away, our apartment here in the city always begins to take on a somewhat different appearance. You know what I mean. The dust begins to accumulate. The dishes pile up in the sink. It's less orderly; less tidy. The first few days she was away it was a real effort, a real strain for me to have to tend to some of the various items of housekeeping. I don't enjoy this sort of thing, but I can do it. Returning home after a long day at the church, it was a strain for me to have to face some of the various tasks of housekeeping. I don't like for things to get too far behind while she's away so I try to do a bit each day. But now, however, as the time draws near for her to return, these items of housekeeping do not present the strain and effort and drudgery that they did for me a few days ago, two weeks ago. I know how much it means to my wife to come home to a clean apartment and believe me the apartment will be clean. You can be sure of this - the dishes will be washed, the rugs vacuumed, the plants watered, the trash emptied, and everything will be back in place, and I may even go so far before she returns to do some of those things that she's been wanting me to do for such a long time. At this point I really don't mind doing them. I know how much it means to her to come home to a clean apartment. The point is that it's half the effort when you do something out of love for another person. It's not the best illustration I know. Some of you may say "Oh you're just doing it out of fear, not out of love. You know what will happen to you if you don't". But that's not the case. I really don't mind doing it when I know just how much it means to her for me to do it. Now mind you I don't want any of you saying anything to her about this 'cause she might want me to do it all the time. These girls can be clever. And if any of you, out of your concern and affection for me want to come over and help me, I'd be happy to have you come. Anyway what I wanted to say was this: when you do something for the love of it, or out of love for someone else, the strain and effort is considerably less. It's cut in half. This is the sort of thing that Jesus was suggesting when he said his yoke was easy. The yoke of love. It's easy in comparison with other yokes.

"But" some of you may say "there are some thing we have to do in life that never bring us any enjoyment no matter how we look at them or try to regard them". Yes I agree with you and unless we are thoroughly unrealistic, we must come to terms somehow with this fact. All of us have things we have to do, things we may not enjoy doing. I don't enjoy some of the things I have to do in my work in running this church, and yet I have to do them in order to make other things possible. There are some things we have to do; things we may never enjoy doing and we need to come to terms with this fact!

LEARN OF ME

Perhaps this where I should introduce to you the second suggestion that grows out of this text. And Jesus said "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me" Learn of me. It's as though he were saying "I can't take all of your burdens away. Life without any burdens really wouldn't be life. I can't carry them for you, but I can do this. I can show you how to carry them, and this will make them lighter."

I suppose we always hesitate to paraphrase the words of Jesus. It's a somewhat difficult and presumptuous thing for us to do, but it is helpful to take his wisdom and put it into the words of our own time.

I think he'd say this to us. "Don't try to carry your burden alone. You can't do it and don't even think you can." It reminds me of something that happened the other day. I was riding the subway from 86th Street to Grand Central Station and an elderly gentleman got on here at 86th Street and he was carrying what appeared to be a rather burdensome and heavy suitcase. He held it all the way to Grand Central. He didn't set it down. He could have. The subway wasn't at all crowded. I felt like going over to him and saying "Brother why don't you rest your suitcase on the floor. Set it down. You don't have to carry it." And so I would say this to you, or what Jesus I think would say to us would be this: whatever you're carrying, whatever burden you're trying to support, remember that the energies of God are underneath you. Turn to those energies. Use them and depend upon them. They'll support you just as the subway would have supported the heavy suitcase that the man insisted on holding.

And Jesus might add this: "Don't carry more than you have to". For instance, if you're carrying the burden of a great regret, if deep down in your heart there is a regret about something you once did or recently have done, drop it. It's not doing you any good. It's hurting you and slowing down your pace. Once that regret has been acknowledged and the relationship reestablished as far as it can be, then drop the burden of it and let it go. As someone has said "Happiness depends on two things: a poor memory and good health.

Or if you're carrying the burden of trying to be someone you are not, trying to live as though you had talents you do not have and needingly yourself because you do not have them, drop it. We all do it. I know we do. I find myself doing it. Everytime I ride by Christ Church at Park and 60th I find myself thinking of the man who has been minister there for over forty years, and I say to myself, "Oh if only I could be like him. If only I could do some of the things he has done. If only I could accomplish one tenth of what he's accomplished. If only I could preach like him." But this is a burden that I must drop. I cannot be like him, or like anyone else. I can only be myself. That is all that God expects me to be. You cannot be anyone else. You can only be yourself, and when you fret about not being like some other person, or about not having what someone else has, you're carrying an unnecessary burden that you need not carry.

Or if you're carrying the burden of living up to some other person's standard of living, straining all of the time to make more money in order to buy more cars and belong to more clubs because your friends have more than one car and belong to more than one club (and this, I'm sorry to say, runs through so much of our pattern of life), drop it. Have what you can. Enjoy what you have and do what you're able.

Jesus carried his own burden superbly, but he did not try to carry the burdens of the government and he did not carry the burden of God the Father in heaven who was holding the stars in their courses. He left that to God.

And the last thing that I am sure he would say to you would be this, whatever your burden is, whatever you are carrying, carry it gladly. But you say "How can I?" I know some of you are carrying rather heavy burdens - physical burdens, anxieties about your family, people you love, anxieties about your work. It's almost inconceivable that some of them be carried gladly. I am not saying that I could do it if I were in your shoes, but I think I know what the clue is and where it may be

I think the only way that you can carry anything gladly is to carry it for someone you love. And perhaps I should go one step further and suggest this. If it is something that you cannot carry for anybody you love, then I would suggest that you drop it. Thomas a Kempis once put this grand idea into words that are unforgettable: "If thou beat the cross cheerfully, it will bear thee". Remember that when your burdens begin to get heavy. For when you live under the yoke of love, the yoke of His love, the burdens of life are always much easier to bear.

"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"

LET US PRAY:

Help us, Our Father, in the moments of quietness here at the end of another service to set aside all of the tensions, the normal responsibilities and exertions of our daily lives and rest in thee as though we were held in thy everlasting arms. Teach us to go gladly on our way for the sake of those we love and when our burdens get to heavy for us to bear, give us the grace to quietly ask thee to help us. We ask this in the spirit of Christ, our Master. Amen