

Matthew 11:25-30

²⁵⁻²⁶ Abruptly Jesus broke into prayer: “Thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You’ve concealed your ways from sophisticates and know-it-alls, but spelled them out clearly to ordinary people. Yes, Father, that’s the way you like to work.”

²⁷ Jesus resumed talking to the people, but now tenderly. “The Father has given me all these things to do and say. This is a unique Father-Son operation, coming out of Father and Son intimacies and knowledge. No one knows the Son the way the Father does, nor the Father the way the Son does. But I’m not keeping it to myself; I’m ready to go over it line by line with anyone willing to listen.

²⁸⁻³⁰ “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Burned In, Not Burned Out

We are very blessed to have in this church two members, three including myself, who have graduated from Seminary, and they can certainly attest to the fact that we study the Bible *a lot* in Seminary. We don’t just study the Bible; we *dissect* it. We do our historic criticism, our literary criticism, our cultural and form criticism, and every other kind of criticism imaginable, and it can be a really challenge our faith. You’d think that it would build our faith, but it’s not always that way. Let me try to explain using an analogy: We have a lot of mothers here today, and imagine if you will holding your new born baby and having doctors come in and explain to you everything about that baby’s biology and chemistry, how all the organs work, the distinction of all the different kinds of cells, how they interact, the way neurons fire, the way food is ingested and digested and excreted. And you’re just thinking, “This is my baby! This is little Jack. This is Tyler. Oh, I think I heard him say, ‘Ma.’” You just want to adore your child, and all that information can kind of spoil it for you. Well there are a lot of folks who feel that way about the Bible; they’ve read passages that have profoundly affected their lives, and the details are not what is most important. What matters is what it *means* to you, how the words have affected the way you think and feel, the way you live your life. You don’t want to know how many *redactions* it’s gone through. You don’t want to even want to know who wrote it and who it was written for, because as far as you’re concerned *God wrote it for you!* It should be enough that the passage has touched your heart!

This particular passage is one that has deeply touched my heart, and I think many of yours, because it speaks to our human condition directly: The New Revised Standard version of the Bible translates verse 28 as “Come to me, all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens.” How many of us can relate to that? I see a few of you who are a bit weary from two days of cranberries, not to mention the months of work leading up to it. I see some of you who are weary from filling out all the forms required of you as church leaders for the charge conference that was held yesterday. And I haven’t mentioned all the personal challenges that you may be facing

– health, family, finance, employment, etc. We all carry burdens, and here in this passage Jesus is *inviting us* to come to him. We appreciate such company when we are weary or when we carry heavy burdens.

And the author of this particular version of the Bible goes a little beyond the New Revised Standard Version when translating verse 28. This version of the Bible that I've chosen for today's service (called "The Message") is not what we call a *translation* of the Bible; it's a *paraphrase*. The author is interpreting it based upon his own personal experiences and needs, or what they perceive to be the personal experiences and needs of their audience, in this case a modern, English speaking audience. And so the author adds the phrase, "burned out on religion." That's not in the original Greek, and we don't know if the original Greek-speaking audience was in fact "burned out on religion," but the writer of this translation is betting on the fact that a lot of modern readers *are* burned out on religion. A series of surveys taken in the recent past asked people about their religion and their spirituality, and the results showed that a decreasing number of people consider themselves "religious" though a high number consider themselves "spiritual." Fewer and fewer people align themselves with organized religion, but there are a lot of people who confess a belief in God. What does this tell us? Perhaps that that *are* a great number of people who are burned out on religion.

What is burn out? Burn out is a lethargy that settles in when we become disillusioned with something. Burn out is a weariness and lack of joy with something that may at one time brought us joy. It drains us of energy and incentive. I've seen churches that are burned out. I've seen a lot of people get disillusioned and "burn out" on religion to the point of abandoning it. These folks still ponder the existence of God, even *pray* to God, but they just don't see religion as a means to build a relationship with God, and so they choose to abandon it, to start with a blank slate rather than taking on all the traditions and customs and theologies and the sacred writings of an established religion

But the problem with starting with a blank slate is that you are dispelling of all the good along with what may be bad. You're throwing out the baby with the bathwater so to speak. Religion is thousands of years old, and it's not the source of all things evil – critics are apt to note how religion is often the cause behind wars and discrimination and persecution, but it's not the religion but the misuse of religion that has led to so much tragedy, and anti-religious movements share just as much responsibility for the wars, discrimination, and persecution as "religious" movements have.

And religions always have good intentions; they want to build a person's relationship with the Divine. Humans have sought God for a long time, and God has sought humans for an even longer time. It's good to strive for a relationship with God, and our ancestors who strove for that relationship wanted to share their experience and understanding with their children. Ancient folks passed on their experiences and understanding of God first by oral tradition, telling stories to their children, then in written tradition, passing their experience and understanding to people they would never know. And there is a lot to be gained, in our pursuit of God, by looking at these writings, by exploring the experiences of those who came before us.

Jesus appreciated this. He did not abandon his faith tradition but worked within that tradition to reform it. Jesus loved scripture. He learned from and studied it – recall that incident recorded in Luke’s gospel where a twelve-year-old Jesus stays behind in Jerusalem when his parents head back to Nazareth. They go back to find Jesus and where is he? He’s in the Temple asking questions and reading scripture. Remember when he went into the wilderness for 40 days and was tempted by Satan; Jesus quotes scripture to counter Satan’s jabs; it was the written word that helped him resist temptation. Jesus was a man of the word who embraced his tradition as imperfect as the leaders of his faith were.

And it would have been easy for Jesus to “burn out” on religion. He saw a lot of problems with how the learned men were translating and applying the written word, and he got a lot of push back from the leaders and authorities when he chose to do things in new ways. To be honest, if I were him I might have grown tired of the push back and the critics. I might have chucked the whole religion and just gone fishing on Sundays...or Saturdays as it would have been then.

But Jesus had discovered something. He discovered that God was his dad in a very special way. No one knows when exactly he discovered it – renaissance paintings depict a very smart, regal looking infant Jesus with a halo, looking very approvingly upon the wise men paying him homage. Did that infant know he was God’s chosen son, or did that realization come later? It’s not really important when he realized it, but what’s important is that he *did* realize it. He had a unique relationship with the Father. What’s more it was an ever evolving relationship with the Father. Jesus had such an intimate relationship with the Father that he could not just abandon the religion and the tradition that had brought him to that realization. He loved the Law. He identified as a Jew, as a people delivered from slavery and misery by God. Most importantly he knew how much God loves us – not just the Jewish people but *everyone*. God wanted to free all people from bondage, not just the nation of Israel.

And Jesus realized that such deliverance had already occurred in him. Yes, Israel was still under Roman occupation. Yes, people were still oppressing other people. But God is still in charge if you let him be in charge, and Jesus let him be in charge. God had delivered him from slavery to sin and death, and Jesus celebrated that deliverance personally. He spoke of people being free, free from sin, free from bondage to fear, and free *to* love as created us to love. This passage that we read today resonates with me because, according to verse 30, Jesus invites us to “learn to live freely and lightly.” The NRSV calls this abundant life. It’s the life Jesus had learned to live, and the life that he invites us to live.

I’ll humbly admit that I have a lot to learn about living in Christ. I’ve had a taste of abundant life, of living “freely and lightly,” enough of a taste to hook me for life, but like anyone else I sometimes stray from the way.

But I’ve lived enough of it, and I believe that many of you have lived enough of it, to stay hooked.

And if you ask what is the mission of the church, I would say it is to welcome people into abundant living, into life lived freely and lightly. It’s not a brainwashed life – not a life where we deny the heartaches and tribulations and the sorrow that comes with any life, but it’s a life that is

grounded in an intimate relationship with a God that you know loves you and promises that love to be eternal, and it's a life devoted to Christ as Lord and Master.

So I continue to pray and ponder what our mission is at Bethel. We have a mission statement that's good, but I want to add to it this notion of abundant living, of living freely and lightly, like walking on air. And I imagine our church as a vehicle for others to come into such a life.

We just concluded our 27th Cranberry Festival, and I could see that the people serving did not just consider this a fundraising event, although it certainly did raise funds to help us sustain, embellish, and expand our ministries. But I saw people on a mission, a mission to share an abundant life with those who may be in search of one – people who may be “burned out” on organized religion, and if it's any consolation you can be assured that your pastor is anything but organized. You can be assured that this church is not about rules and regulations, though there are some of those. I like to think that this church is about abundant living. The opposite of burn out is what? Burn in? I like to think of us as a people where the Spirit of God *burns in* each of us, ignites us to love and serve and welcome people, to offer encouragement and support and hope to world that at times seems to be running amuck . I pray that each of you *burn in* Christ.