

What are we weary of? (14th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30)

Perhaps this verse has been lifted out of its context by design.

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

How many times have I seen this scripture passage, wrested out of its context and plunked down on a plaque? It is a pious promise for those who are weary, and aren't we all? It is one of the famous verses to memorize (although I will admit that none of my confirmation students has chosen it yet—maybe they are not yet weary).

But more often than not, I have been the one who has picked this verse up out of Matthew and set it down where I wanted it to be. Conveniently for preaching purposes, it often shows up in the US context at about the time we are getting ready for our July 4 celebrations of freedom. I can't help but hear Jesus' words alongside the words of Emma Lazarus, at the base of the Statue of Liberty, “Give me your poor, your tired, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”

What *is* the context of these verses? I have experienced the Gospel of Matthew as one of a higher righteousness. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is not an invitation to “come to him, all you who are weary”; it feels instead like an invitation to ratchet up our discipleship one more notch. “But I say unto you...” Jesus says, again and again.

Perhaps this verse has been lifted out of its context by design. It comes at the end of words of judgment after the arrest of John. People criticized John for his asceticism. He was all gloom and doom and no fun. He wore those weird clothes and preached messages that some did not want to hear. It appears that they are now criticizing Jesus for just the opposite things: he eats and drinks with sinners. He appears to be having entirely too much fun.

So in this context, what does it mean to be weary and heavy laden?

I remember my first year in college, walking in on the day of the final exam. Our instructor, a Catholic sister, greeted us with harsh words, as she had been fielding questions about whether certain things would “be on the exam,” things that she viewed as nit-picky and small.

“In the end,” she said, “I’m glad that I’m going to be judged by God, and not by you people.”

Jesus, like my professor, is clearly exasperated. But then suddenly he shifts to words of invitation, words that climb right out of the context of Matthew and into our lives. “Come to me, all you who are weary, and are heavy laden,” he says, and maybe he means those who are weary of being judgmental and are just done with it all. Or maybe he means those who are weary of being judged, of being picked apart for falling short. Maybe he means those who are weary of having all the answers, or maybe he means those who are weary of not knowing, who just want to know one thing—just one thing, Jesus. Let one thing be sure.

I will give you rest. There’s the one thing, the one thing that is sure. It’s a promise. But that rest depends on something strange. It depends on a yoke.

I keep thinking about that one verse that we wrest out of its context: *I will give you rest*. And maybe it’s no accident that we just love this one verse but don’t read what comes after, the part about the yoke. Because what it says is not popular, at least not in our culture: it tells us that burdens are shared, that we are not responsible just for ourselves but for one another, that our work lets others rest, and that our rest makes others work.