

HOMILY

The Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time *July 6, 2008*

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Our lesson for today contains a verse that many of us need to take to heart. Jesus says, *“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.”* Jesus is describing many of us. He knows our situation. Tired, stressed out, battling fatigue, our nerves are on edge.

A young mother was describing a terrible day she had experienced. The washing machine broke down, the telephone kept ringing, her head ached, and the mail carrier brought a bill she had no money to pay. Almost to the breaking point, she lifted her one-year-old into his highchair, leaned her head against the tray and began to cry. Without a word, he son took his pacifier out of his mouth and stuck it in hers.

It goes with the pressures of modern life. Some of us are stressed out and we are tired. Some of this is due to work. Studies show that we’re working harder than ever. Jesus says to us, *“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”*

When Jesus speaks about a yoke, we need to visualize the kind of yoke that Jesus had in mind. It was a kind of crossbar with two u-shaped pieces that encircled the necks of a pair of oxen. The easiest meaning of this text is that when we are yoked to Jesus, he walks besides us and helps us bear our burdens. We don’t have to bear the weight of the world by ourselves. There are many ways in which being yoked to Jesus gives us rest.

Now we need to recognize that there are other forms of fatigue more draining than physical fatigue. Mental fatigue and emotional fatigue can wear on us more than physical fatigue. In 1863 the Civil War was raging and the end was far from sight. Abraham Lincoln was out for a ride with his friend and aide, Noah Brooks. Brooks, noticing the President’s obvious fatigue, suggested that he take a brief rest

when they got back to the White House. “A rest,” Lincoln replied. “I don’t know about a rest. I suppose it’s good for the body, but the tired part of me is inside and out of reach.”

Lincoln was acknowledging a very important truth. There are many sources of fatigue. Physical fatigue may be the most benign. There is the fatigue that comes from stress, fatigue that comes from worry, fatigue that comes from not only worrying about the future but also worrying about the past. There is the fatigue that comes from trying to be something we are not. Physical fatigue, unless overdone, helps us sleep peacefully at night. Emotional and mental fatigue actually keeps us awake. That’s when we get really, really tired.

When it comes to having the whole world on one’s shoulders, I think of Pope John XXIII, Holy Father to the Church just as the changes started happening. Even with the whole world upon his shoulders, he’d put out his nightlight, put his head on his pillow and say, “Good night, dear Lord. I must go to sleep as I entrust everything into your hands. After all, you are the one who never sleeps.”

Rather than take over the Lord’s job description, he put it all into God’s hands, needing to sleep in preparation for a new day. He needed to be rejuvenated to tackle another’s day’s concerns with God’s help. May I suggest you turn your worries over to God?

One further thought. When we are yoked to Jesus, we no longer have to prove to the world who we are. Many of us have a vast insecurity in our hearts about our own self worth. That insecurity makes every task we handle more difficult. So often we expend an enormous amount of energy on something we are not.

Some of you may have seen the Johnny Cash movie, *Walk the Line*. When Cash was 12 years old, his older brother died in a tragic accident. Cash’s father took his grief out on Johnny. “Death took the wrong boy,” his father told him again and again. His brother was the “good” boy. He should have lived. Johnny was the “bad” boy. If anyone should have died, it should have been Johnny. No wonder Johnny Cash spent so many years acting out his rage and his feelings of being “no good.” Can you imagine a father doing that to a son? No wonder that for many years of his life, Johnny Cash engaged in self-destructive behavior. It’s a wonder that he survived at all. But isn’t it great that by the end of his life Johnny Cash discovered a heavenly father who accepted him just as he was?

Cash's situation may be extreme, but there are many people who feel for one reason or another that they do not belong, that their life has little value, that they are failures who can never measure up. There are still others who put themselves under an intolerable burden of expectations they cannot possibly live up to. These expectations produce both stress and fatigue. To be able to entrust our worries to another and to be ourselves is some of the greatest benefits of our faith.

Soren Kierkengard was a Danish philosopher who suffered bouts of extreme melancholy due to a difficult upbringing. One day he wrote in his journal, "And now, with God's help, I shall become myself." What a liberating thought. "And now, with God's help, I will become myself." Not what others expect me to be; not some unrealistic image I have of myself. No, with God's help I shall become who I really am. No more stressful pretenses. No more misguided strivings. I will be me. When we feel accepted by Jesus, then, for the first time in our life, we will become free. When we are yoked to Jesus, we no longer have to prove to the world that we belong.

Dear friends, are you lying awake at night worrying about your future? Worrying about your past? Wondering whether you measure up? Wondering whether you are loved, accepted, forgiven? Let it go. Let it go at the foot of the cross. There is one who loves you. One who died for you. One who lives with you.

There is an ancient legend that says that in the region of Galilee two thousand years ago, all the farmers knew where to get the finest yokes for their oxen. There was a certain carpenter in Nazareth famed for shaping and smoothing the wood so that the burden of their oxen would be as light as possible.

Jesus is still in the business of fashioning yokes to ease the burdens of his weary children. He still says to people of today

"Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy and my burden light."