A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*Calling All Weary*

Matthew 11:25-30

July 5, 2020

By the end of Matthew 11, Jesus is right in the thick of human trouble. His friend John the Baptizer is in prison and all people can do is debate about who’s a better religious leader: John or Jesus. It’s more fun to sit back and debate that than to actually follow either one of them. By this time, Jesus has been through some of the major cities and seen the state of the people there. They are Jews living in Roman-occupied Capernaum, Tyre, Sidon, Chorazin. And they could not or would not listen to what he had to say—to the hope he had to offer them. Maybe the burdens they were bearing were too much.

And yet this morning we still hear Jesus calling, calling, calling out for all who will listen, you who are weary, you who are heavy burdened. We read in Matthew 11 those beautiful words: *Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*. So, on behalf of everyone today who is feeling the weariness of all they are doing and the weight of all they are carrying, a message back to Jesus, in response:

Lord, you sure about that? You invite those who toil and carry heavy loads to come to you. You sure about that? Are you sure that’s what you really want? Because a whole lot of folks are feeling just about like that right about now. If you had a nickel for everyone right now who was weary and heavy laden, well, you’d have a bunch of nickels. Yet, you’re still calling, right to us, to a lot of people who are weary, and heavy burdened, those are your words, but I think they include words we use now: anxious, stressed, angry, even depressed.

Lord, are you sure about this as a messianic strategy? Because it seems like what you’d want instead are the strong and self-assured, those with boundless energy and full of salt and vigor—people like Alexander Hamilton. For some reason, he’s on my mind this weekend. And I know you have a special place in your heart for people like that. How else to explain Peter? Or Paul? Or Dorothy Day? Or the countless people who greet each new day and each new challenge with the hopefulness of the Holy Spirit’s assurance that you will put nothing in their way they are not strong enough to deal with. Give us all more days like those.

But that’s not all who you call to come. And right now, there’s a lot of folks who are feeling pretty weary of a lot of things. We’re halfway through a year that, well . . . it’s been a year already. Have you ever seen anything like this? Did you ever live through anything like this? I remember the story when you sat down at Jacob’s well in the heat of the day. You sent the disciples on ahead to find some food. You said, ‘I’ll just rest here a while.’ It was midday. In the heat. Well, it’s midday now in the year of our Lord 2020, and we, too, would like to find a deep well with cool water and just rest for a while. Your words are like that to us. Give us a bucket that we may draw out those words and drink them in as living water.

And we do remember you endured 33 AD. Right, you know the darkness of the human heart. You know the pain of suffering. You know what it’s like to see people you love suffer, and even die. You know what it’s like to suffer for them. You know what it’s like to see bad politics and even worse religion. And then see them come together. You know what it’s like to be abandoned, lonely, alone. You know what it’s like to feel like God is a long way away. “Why have you forsaken me?” And you know what it’s like feel like your life is being swept along currents you do not control.

You lowered yourself, submitted yourself to become a human and to death, even death on a cross. You descended all the way down. So maybe you do know, much more than we ever will. You bore your weight, and you took ours upon you, too-- even on the cross. No, we will not forget that.

Still . . .a lot of folks are weary right now. A lot of folks you love and died for.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden. Sign us up. We’re weary right now, Jesus. We’re weary of a lot of things. We’re toiling, toiling, toiling, but sometimes it’s like we’re spinning our wheels, stuck in the mud. We don’t mean to complain, but you said the weary could come to you. I think we’re coming *because* we’re weary, and we need to come back to you. Where else would we go?

We’re weary of this pandemic in every way you can be weary of it. We can’t shoot it, we can’t buy and sell it, we can’t build a wall tall enough to keep it away; we can’t protest it or vote against it. We can’t do any of the things that make us feel like we have power. The only positive thing we seem to be able to do is acknowledge our powerlessness and cover our faces. If all this isolation that we are enduring recalls us to a spirituality of simplicity, that would be good. Maybe the mask is a sign of a call to a deeper silence—that, too, would be good. We’re not good at simplicity or silence when we’re not in control of them.

We’re weary of the uncertainty in all of this. Wendell Berry’s prayer began when he feared for what his and his children’s lives would become. We’re there, too.

We’re weary of the deconstruction of so much in our society, and we’re weary of the weight of all that needs to be deconstructed. And we’re heavy laden with the weight of trying to figure out the difference.

Lord, we’re weary. Let’s be honest. It’s not really all their fault, the other people—it’s not a *them* problem, and it’s not the virus--it’s not an *it* problem. Lots of people if they are honest say: It’s a *me* problem. I’m tired of myself. I’ve spent a lot of time with myself lately. I’m tired of who I become. That’s what I’m really weary of . . .is looking at myself in the mirror, seeing myself talking back to me on computer screens all day. I just wish I were different. I don’t understand why I do what I do . . .I don’t do what I really want to do, but I go and do the very thing I hate. I don’t do the good I want, but the evil I do is what I keep on doing. As soon as I try to do good, there’s the bad right there, always, always close at hand. In all of this, I really do delight in you in my True Self. I know that. I know that deep down I love God, and I love Jesus. That’s who I am at the core of my being. It really is. But then it’s like I almost watch myself sabotage myself again and again. Why is that? It’s like I’m at war with myself.

If I’m honest, Lord, that’s what I’m weary of the most. I’m weary of struggling and fighting and then going around and around in circles over and over again and it seems like I never get anywhere. The ancient church Fathers talked about a stage of purgation that we move through on our way to becoming like you. When is the graduation ceremony? Is that cancelled, too? Because I feel like I’m stuck and not moving anywhere, remanded to remedial grades over and over. Sometimes I want to give up, but I don’t think you want that. And I don’t want that. But I feel like a wretch. Wretched person that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

There they are, Lord, the weary and heavy laden. This is still who you want? You do.

You invite people like us to come to you and find rest for our souls. Your yoke is easy and your burden is light. That’s good because it would be a hard thing to tell worn out people to do one more thing, to lay one more thing on their shoulders. But it sounds a lot more like what you do is you free us from burdens we don’t need to carry and restore strength to our weary souls.

When I feel like the weight of the world is crushing me, you say, “Peace, be still.”

When I feel like I’m bailing water out of my little boat, you say, “Peace, be still.”

When I feel like I’m punching at the air, you say, “All shall be well.”

When I feel like I’m hopeless, helpless, you say, “Confess Christ with your lips and believe in your heart that he is raised from the dead, and you shall be saved.”

When I feel like I’m worthless, wretched, you say, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound.”

When I feel all alone, you say, “Great is Thy Faithfulness.”

When I’m so discouraged, I could lie down and just never get back up, you say, “The Lord is my shepherd…He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. “

When I feel like I’m beaten, robbed, left by the side of the road, you come by, heal my wounds, lift me up, and take me home.

When I feel lost and alone and shamed, you wrap your arms around me, put a ring on my finger, and welcome me home with a fatted calf and a celebration.

When I feel like I’m buried and lost in a field not my own, you somehow find me, dig me out, lift me up, open me up, and say, “Look at this treasure.” You seek me out and say “Look at this pearl of great price.”

And when I’ve left you again, run off into the night, denied you, cursed your name, denied I even know you with my words and my actions, you look at me and say, “Forgive them, Father, they know not what they do.”

And when I feel like I’ve let you down again and again, you ask me, “Do you love me?”

And I say, “Yes, Lord, you know I love you”

“Do you love me?” “Yes Lord, you know I love you.”

“Do you love me?” “Yes, you know everything. You know I love you.”

And you say, “Ok. Rise up; I have good things for you to do. Feed my sheep.”

I want your yoke on my shoulders, Jesus. You say it is easy. It doesn’t matter, as long as it’s yours. I want your burden on my back. You say it is light. It doesn’t matter as long as it’s yours. My soul craves your promised rest and your good work. Your sabbath and your kingdom. Your presence and your new creation. Your grace and your call. Your peace and your life living, burning inside of me.

Amen.

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