

“Naming Our Burden”

July 9, 2023

Scripture: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

In his book *The Luminous Darkness*, written in 1965, theologian and Christian mystic Howard Thurman, who was a Black scholar and activist born and raised in Florida, describes what living in the Jim Crow south was like. What he writes isn't surprising, really, as far as the kinds of indignities and disadvantages Black people were subjected to. But he makes one observation that I found especially insightful. He writes, “The fact that the status of the Negro in a segregated society is frozen does not mean that he is without a special kind of power. In order to keep his status frozen, many things must be done within the white society which limit its development and hamper its enrichment. When a new law for the common good is being considered, before the merits of the law itself can be examined, there is a previous consideration that must be taken into account: what bearing will the new law have on the relationship between whites and Negroes? A way must always be found that will provide maximum benefit to the white community and minimum benefit to the Negro community.”

Keeping that system in place required constant monitoring by the people in charge. They didn't dare leave the smallest opening for an assertion of Black civil rights. This led, as the economist Heather McGee wrote in 2020 in her book *The Sum of Us*, to the bizarre practice in many communities of eliminating public swimming pools in order to avoid allowing Black residents to swim in them alongside white residents. That's one example of how laws and actions have to be finessed if a system that's inherently unjust is to be maintained. It's a tremendous burden on the leaders who have to keep watch and on those they are trying to elevate. It's a burden that is entirely unnecessary except for the bigotry it's designed to support.

We all carry burdens in our lives. We all have responsibilities for people in our families or people in our work. At times we take those burdens on willingly or we accept them gracefully. Other burdens we shoulder resentfully, grumbling at every step. None of us gets through life without some demands being made on us. So, when I hear Jesus talking about those who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, I don't think he means the kinds of responsibilities we all experience in one form or another because we live in families or have jobs. I think he's talking about the kinds of burdens being described by Howard Thurman and Heather McGee, the unnecessary burdens that keep us all oppressed.

I say that because I'm convinced Jesus is no therapist. He's not trying to relieve us of pain or soothe our sensibilities. His words are always a challenge; they're always meant to make us dig deeper in ourselves and in our society to discover the true core of our anxiety and fear. In this reading, for instance, he confronts the inconsistency of religious leaders who are never satisfied with the behaviors of those who dare speak truth to power. When it came to his predecessor, John the Baptist, they criticized him for being too ascetic; yet they criticize Jesus for being too hedonistic. They refuse to be satisfied like children teasing each other on the playground. And they do it so they can justify their own sense of superiority. They do it to maintain the status quo, to keep people in their place.

That actually becomes clearer in the part of the passage we skipped. For some reason the people who design the lectionary, the choices of scripture readings we use each Sunday, felt those verses weren't relevant to Jesus' argument. In them he berates the towns where he's ministered and preached; he talks about Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum and compares them to Tyre and Sidon, two cities denounced by Isaiah, and Sodom, whose fate was sealed in the ancient past because of their abuse of outsiders. Jesus' message is being refused by the leaders of these towns because they want to preserve a system that is oppressive to common people. That might not be malicious of them; it could be they are more interested in keeping the peace and not risking the wrath of Rome than in just having control. But the result is the same. The people Jesus wants to liberate from oppression remain oppressed.

But they're not the only ones weighed down by that burden. As Thurman points out, it's a lot of work to maintain an unjust system. Everyone needs the rest Jesus offers. Recognizing the all-encompassing loving nature of Jesus' words, even when he criticizes, can help us in our efforts to name the burdens we carry. When it comes to racial justice, for instance, those of us in white society are burdened with privilege which can prevent us from seeking the well-being of our sisters and brothers of color. Even though we may want to see equity of access to wealth and education and healthcare, our privilege weighs us down and makes us weary. Jesus offers us another way. He offers his burden, his yoke. And notice he doesn't say the alternative to the heavy burden we carry is to carry nothing. The burden he offers is real, but we no longer carry it alone.

What God is seeking from us is our cooperation, our participation in creating the world God longs to establish. That is a burden but it's not oppressive; it doesn't make us weary. It's exhilarating. It fills us instead of draining us. It promises to immerse us in a world where we all have a place, where fear no longer motivates us; a world where love is our only purpose and our only hope. In his book *Stride Toward Freedom*, a memoir of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. says of the power of love, "Since the white man's personality is greatly distorted by segregation, and his soul is greatly scarred, he needs the love of the Negro. The Negro must love the white man, because the white man needs his love to remove his tensions, insecurities, and fears." King was convinced that the burden to love Jesus offers us could heal even the wounds of centuries of injustice.

That burden, Jesus' burden to love, can heal us, too. We live in a world right now where certain folks are targeted for discrimination and oppressive neglect because of their gender identity or their immigration status or their religious heritage, not to mention their skin color and the deep history of racism that haunts us all. It's easy in that climate to give in to our fears and insecurities: No one's questioning my gender identity, my skin color, my religious heritage; why should I be concerned about how anyone else is treated? The burden of indifference, the burden of disdain, the burden of undeserved privilege threatens to weigh me down and drive my soul into the dirt. Jesus offers to replace it all with his burden to love. Jesus invites us to carry his burden and share his yoke and be free, finally, of all that weighs us down.

Aren't you tired of carrying so much fear, so much anxiety, so much hate? You can let it all go. Take on the burden to love and see the presence of God all around you in the face of every

person you meet. For his yoke is easy; his burden is light, so let Christ teach you how to be gentle and humble in heart, and find rest for your soul in his love.

Amen