

## The Invitation

A man with a nagging secret is unable to keep it any longer. He goes to confession and admits that for years he has been stealing building supplies from the lumberyard where he works.

“How much lumber did you take?” the priest asks.

“I took enough to build my home and enough for my son’s house. Then I took enough to build houses for my two daughters. Oh, and our cottage at the lake.”

“This is a very serious offense,” says the priest. “I’ll have to think of an appropriate penance. Have you ever considered doing a retreat?”

“No, Father, I never have,” the man replies. “But if you can get the plans, I can get the lumber.”

It seems that this guy had gotten into the habit of stealing lumber. Have you ever tried to break a habit? A bad habit? A habitual behavior harmful to you or to someone else? If so, did you tell yourself that when the time came, when the situation arose, you would respond in a new and different way, instead of automatically responding the way you had previously responded? When the moment of decision arrived, you were conflicted. A struggle raged within you. Surely, your intentions had been good. But the road that’s paved with good intentions—you know where that road leads. In the end, your response was the same as it had always

been. Were you angry with yourself? Did you experience feelings of self-loathing? Feelings of frustration? Did it seem as though someone or something had more power over you than you had over yourself?

A few minutes ago, you heard the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to Christians at Rome. Does it surprise you to know that this great missionary who wrote a considerable portion of the New Testament experienced the same feelings and struggles as we do? But Paul didn't allude to "bad habits" or "mistakes" like we often do. Paul struggled with *sin*.

Our first parents sinned. Human creatures have been programmed to sin, wired for sin. It's in our nature. It's like a load we carry around all the time. The weight of sin wears us out. It's a heavy burden that we believe we'll never be able to put down. And so, in despair, we cry with Paul, "Who will rescue me?"

There are other burdens as well. You hobble in here on Sundays, staggering under the weight of all kinds of baggage: with anxieties that no one but you knows about, with secret concerns and old hurts and new fears that you haven't felt able to share with another living soul. Despite all these burdens, you come to church. And what do you hear?

For the past couple of weeks, you have heard the Word of God on the high price of following Jesus and obeying God, complete with swords and knives and divided families. You have heard demands for allegiance and sacrifice. But you've come back to this place. In

faithfulness, you've come back. And I rejoice that each and every one of you is here to receive the three-fold invitation that Christ extends to you today.

“Come to me,” he urges, “all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens.” If you are exhausted by your struggles and worn down by what feels as weighty as those sandbags borne by Midwestern flood victims; if, like Paul, you are without hope of being able to free yourself from the powers that possess you; if you have begun to understand that you can't get rid of this heavy load on your own; that only by *admitting* your need can you be relieved of it; then these words of Jesus are the best news ever!

*Come here, my child, he encourages. I'll show you how to set all of that down and let it slip away.* “Come to me.” Jesus invites you to come, yet there is more to his gracious invitation.

“Learn from me,” he says. “Learn from me.” Matthew portrays Jesus as One with much to teach us. In this reading, the evangelist wants us to understand Christ as the wisdom of God. That beautiful Advent hymn we sing to Emmanuel resonates here, the one with the stanza beginning, “O come, thou Wisdom from on high.” As Jesus teaches, God's wisdom is shown to be right by what results from it.

In accordance with God's will, knowledge of the Father has been given only to the Son, who chooses to whom the Father will be perfectly revealed. This knowledge, Jesus tells us, isn't offered to those who are

arrogant and clever in the ways of the world: in the “I get mine first” mindset of the prevailing culture. This knowledge is given to those who come to Christ with innocent, childlike trust. Jesus has chosen to reveal this knowledge to you.

Learning from Christ becomes available to you when you come to him and when you accept this portion of his invitation as well: “Take my yoke upon you.” Now, in our contemporary day-to-day lives, you and I don’t run across yokes too frequently, so we may need to stop and think about the significance of a yoke.

For Jesus’ first hearers, a yoke was a common metaphor for the law, the Torah. Pharisees and other religious leaders had knotted the Mosaic law into an intricate tangle of hair-splitting rules so cumbersome that attempting to live under it represented a weighty burden, a ponderous yoke, for those of Jesus’ day. Jesus invites them to take *his* yoke in place of the old, heavy one, beckons them into new life under grace in God’s reign.

Jesus lived in an agrarian society. Because most people made their living farming and planting, Jesus used agricultural images they would readily understand: familiar implements such as a wooden yoke, used to harness two animals together for the labor of pulling the plow.

Okay. We get the idea of a yoke. But here’s what we have more trouble with: Jesus telling us that his yoke is easy. This concept of

easiness is difficult to hold together with his words on the cost of discipleship still ringing in our ears. How can this yoke be easy?

Douglas Hare sheds some light on this dichotomy for us. He points out that “the Greek word translated *easy* means *kind*. A good yoke is one that is carefully shaped so that there will be a minimum of chafing. Jesus’ yoke will be ‘kind’ to our shoulders, enabling us to carry the load more easily. In this sense...his burden will be ‘light.’ Jesus does not diminish the weight of our accountability to God but helps us to bear this responsibility.”

My sisters and brothers, you and I still carry the load of all we’re charged with as his disciples. But your burden becomes light because Christ himself is the one who is yoked with you, bound to you; the gentle, humble One who walks beside you, who helps you, who carries the weight with you. The load lightens when you come to him, when you learn from him, when you take his yoke upon you.

Christ offers that invitation to you today, you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. Through his immeasurable grace, all your burdens are eased, and you find rest. Only through his grace can you find the rest you so desperately need, the rest in him that he promises: the salvation that is your most cherished hope. Come to him. He has prepared a meal for you. Meet him at his table of grace. You’re invited!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the blessed Holy Spirit. Amen.