

"Light and Easy"

Exodus 1:8-14; Matthew 11:28-30

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

March 13, 2016 – 5th Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

Last week we talked about the prevalence of grocery store items featuring a “new and improved” label. Another word you see prominently is “light.” Light mayonnaise, light coffee creamer, light beer. It seems like there are a thousand products on food shelves with “light” in their name. Light usually indicates less calories and fat, and so implies that you can have your cake and eat it, too. It’s supposed to be the easy way to weight control and good health, but then not if you eat twice as much.

We Americans love ways to do something without the usual effort. After WWII the greatest desire was to fill our homes with as many labor-saving devices possible. So we delighted in having a power lawn mower, a dishwasher, self-defrosting refrigerator, gas heat instead of stoking coal, and on and on and on.

Today we’re surrounded everywhere by electronic gadgetry. It seems hard now to remember when we didn’t have it. How many of us, honestly, would be willing to give up our remote controls? Now if someone could just devise a way so that we didn’t have to go to all the effort of raising our arm and pointing it at the set, then we would have it made.

I guess you can’t fault us for wanting easier ways to do things. Few people stayed with horses when automobiles proved to be faster, more comfortable, and less to clean up after. But is a shortcut possible for everything? Is there a “light” way, an easy way, for every aspect of life?

Technology may have some of the answers, but the Gospels also give us a clue to these questions. Jesus recognized this same kind of desire in the people he met, so I don’t think that he would be surprised at all with us. In many ways, however, he says that the light and easy way can sometimes become more burdensome and hard, and what seems more difficult may actually be easier in the long run. Christ summed up this apparent contradiction in the familiar words from today’s scripture, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

These words were spoken to a people who knew what hard life was. From the ancient days of bondage in Egypt, the Jews knew pain and suffering first-hand. In Exodus it tells us that “the Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service....” So it was only natural that they would seek God’s favor in order to have an easier life, free of the oppression and uncertainty of their past.

“Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens,” Jesus said, “and I will give you rest.” We hear these words and find them comforting. Who doesn’t have difficulties along life’s way? Who doesn’t feel the strain that comes with living? Jesus, himself, knew and experienced these kinds of burdens. Often they’re not so much a strain on one’s back, but they have more to do with the soul. These are the kind of burdens that weigh heavily upon the heart.

“Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.” These words apply to many areas of life, but one intention of Jesus may have been in regard to the burden of adhering to religious Law. In contrast to civic regulations, this kind of Law was regarded as the do’s and don’ts of faithful living. It described, sometimes in intricate detail, how a God-centered life at that time should be lived. There was much to remember.

Consider, for example, these instructions for ritual cleansing before eating. “Take at least a quarter log of water, that is, a measure equal to one and one-half eggshells of liquid. Hold the hands with the fingertips upward and pour the water over them until it runs down the wrists. Cleanse the palm of each hand with the fist of the other, then hold the hands with the fingers pointing down, and pour the rest of the water on them from the wrists downwards so that it runs off at the fingertips.” All this just to prepare to eat in a way that it might be favorable to God.

No wonder the Israelites might have felt overburdened by their religion. If one were especially conscientious there was a never-ending list of regulations to follow. Maybe that’s what made the Pharisees so grumpy! The legalism of rules and laws can be hard to bear. What was intended to distinguish right from wrong through ritualized behavior, could also make the relationship with God harder than need be.

Jesus respected the Hebrew Law, but it’s evident that he didn’t abide by it in the same strict way as others. That’s one reason his actions were challenged by those who considered themselves the true bearers of the faith. By comparison to them, Jesus must have seemed lax. He healed on the Sabbath. He ate with sinners. He touched the outcasts. He ignored many of the rituals. To the legalists, what more needed to be said? How could you take a leader seriously when he failed to strictly follow the Law?

In today’s scripture Jesus says in essence, “If this legalism is the burden you’re chaffing under, then come and I’ll give you rest from it.” Another translation for the word “rest” is refreshment, and maybe it even works a little better here. I can hear him saying, “Come if the traditional requirements of faith are heavy on the mind and a drain to the soul, and I will refresh you.”

He also said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me....” A yoke was made of wood and put on the necks of oxen to harness their energy to perform some task. A carpenter in that day would have often been called upon to make such yokes for farmers in his village. So if Jesus followed his father’s trade as a young man, he would have fashioned many of these himself.

What Jesus did here was to invite people to take off this stiff yoke of the Law, this heavy and constant burden, and exchange it for one he offered. “Come, take my yoke upon you... for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” It was like shedding heavy oak and replacing it with balsa wood. The contrast would be that evident. “Come and learn from me,” he said, “for I am gentle and humble in heart....”

What Jesus asked of people then, what Jesus asks of us now, is not the burden of rule-keeping as a means to faith. Faith is more simple than that. Strict adherence to a list of rules and rituals is not really what God wants of us. So he invited the people to shed this traditional approach to God’s favor, and to replace it with a new and more direct response.

At its most basic the sum of his Jesus' teaching is this: "Love God and live right." That's it. It's that easy and that clear. "Love God and live right." That's fundamentally all there is to our faith. The burden of belief is light in that respect. "Love God and live right." All of us can remember those five words. "Love God and live right." Doing it, however, is going to take everything you've got. It will call forth the very best in you.

You see, what Jesus really asks of us is commitment. It's work, but it's the most rewarding work we'll ever undertake. It's walking alongside Jesus and being concerned about the things he's concerned with, attending to the needs he stops to deal with, standing up for the things he gave his life for.

In this simple approach to faith, however, don't be fooled into thinking it is simplistic. Ours is not a faith built on ignorance. You have to be knowledgeable about what the Bible teaches. You have to be aware of the great issues of life which swirl around us. You have to be sensitive to people and their needs. You have to know when it is time to do something, and then you have to do it.

Faith, in Jesus' redefinition, is concerned about love and not legality. Everything, you see, gets reversed in Christ. Light is heavy and heavy is light. Rules are lifted so that one can respond directly and appropriately. Earning God's favor is replaced by understanding that God's love is already given. It is to learn that faithful living is less in meeting life's minimal requirements, than responding in a maximum way.

Today many seek churches which will tell them what to do in every instance. They look for preachers who seem to have the rule-keeping pipeline from God. For many people it is much simpler to be told what to do than to go about the trouble of deciding for themselves. But that kind of simple becomes hard quickly. It relies on giving over to others what should really be personal responsibility within individual situations. When guidance becomes inflexible rules, then it is merely religious law dressed up in new clothes.

I hear Jesus saying: "Come to me each one of you who feels the weight of the world upon your shoulders, and I will refresh you. I will lift human-imposed requirements off you and replace them with what God really wants. I will give you strength for living today and for facing whatever will come tomorrow. Trust in me. What I want you to do will take your fullest effort, your greatest strength, your utmost willpower, but it will be light when you and I do it together."

Love God and live right. That is the essence of our faith and practice. It may be light in rules and regulations, but—believe me—it will challenge the very best in you every day. When Jesus says, "Come, follow me" it is not a forced march but an invitation to a journey, a journey where you will discover your full self and how to live with concern for others. Now that is pleasing to God.