

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
July 6, 2008
14th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Heavy Burdens

It was starting to get heavy. You could tell by the way their shoulders were slumped and their necks looked strained. For some of them, the weight revealed itself with a heavy heart or a worn-out soul. Even Jesus was starting to feel weighed down by it. People had been trying to share it with him right and left. And he was starting to get tired of it. Every once in a while, Jesus found his own heart was fighting against the heaviness of it all.

His heart was feeling especially heavy the day John's followers came to him with their question. "Jesus," they had said, "John wants to know if you are really THE ONE." Are you really the one for whom we have been waiting all this time, or are we to wait for another?

With that one question, Jesus felt the heavy burden of expectations unfulfilled. "Are you really THE ONE," they had asked. He tried to shrug it off, telling them to go and tell John what all they had observed following him around. He reminded them about the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, the lepers being cleansed, the deaf hearing, the dead being raised, and the poor receiving good news.

"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard," Jesus responded. "He will figure it out." And with his words, John's followers had turned to leave. But as they walked away, Jesus saw that their shoulders still sagged and their hearts were still heavy. The burden of expectations unfulfilled really weighed them down.

And it was not just that small group of John's followers who were carrying around that heavy burden—the one filled to the brim with how they thought God was supposed to act, and therefore, who they expected God's Messiah to be—the heavy burden of expectations unfulfilled.

Everywhere Jesus went people openly argued about who he was or, rather, who he was not. "I think he is Elijah," one might say. "No, he is just some other prophet," said another. "Maybe he is just a rabbi," a man would state. "But they say he is the Messiah," a woman would respond. From the palace steps to the temple courtyard, the question reverberated through the crowds. "Is he really it?" they would ask. "But he is not what we expected. Are we sure this Jesus of Nazareth is really THE ONE?"

Yes, Jesus fought daily not to let their heavy burdens weigh him down.

And on this day, as he watched John's saggy-shouldered disciples walk off, Jesus finally had enough. "What am I going to do with you," he asked, more than a bit frustrated. For it was clear that none of them were satisfied; that all of them felt their expectations about how God was supposed to act and who Jesus was supposed to be remained unfulfilled.

John the Baptist had not satisfied them. And he was an amazing prophet and messenger, unlike any prophet who had come before. He was strict and particular. He was appropriately somber, a teatottler who, before being arrested, ate a strange diet and dressed like a wild desert hermit. The word of God was powerfully on his lips as he proclaimed repentance and preparation. Through him, God was changing lives.

And yet, with each of John's sermons, their burdens seemed to grow heavier. "He's the preparer of the way?" they asked one another. "That is not how I would do it," they would say. They thought that John was too traditional and old-school. He preached far too much about fire and brimstone, far too much about repentance and judgment, far too much about mourning and wailing. He was just as bad as those professional wailers you hired for a funeral. He brought everyone down and he was way too serious about it all.

"No," they would state, as they slung their heavy burdens of expectations unfulfilled back over their shoulders. "John the Baptist is not the kind of preacher and preparer I would choose." And their backs would start to ache with the pressure of trying to be God and their necks would strain with all the weight.

And then, Jesus burst on their scene. The one for whom John had been preparing. The one for whom they had all been waiting. Jesus came with merriment and kingdom joy and compassion. He brought the good news of God's grace and love, of God's healing and salvation. Jesus was THE ONE and through him, God was changing the world.

And yet, every time he sat down with the tax collectors and the sinners, their burdens seemed to grow heavier. "He just cannot be the Messiah," they would say, stumbling under the weight. "He is far too open, too convivial even, too tolerant. He eats and drinks too much with the wrong kinds of people. He does not act like God should act. He refuses to stay within the boundaries and he pushes against too many rules. He is like those flute players at a dance, trying to get everyone to join in when everybody really just wants to sit and judge everyone else's dance moves.

"No," they would say to each other, with hearts so heavy they drug on the floor. "That Jesus is not who I'd choose to be the Messiah." And they would take another Aleive to ease the pain of trying to be God.

And Jesus kept dodging their burdens. They kept trying to place them on his shoulders, and he would quickly have to step to the side or step away. And he was getting frustrated with seeing them constantly hunched over. No matter what, they just could not be satisfied. They just could not let go of their burdens of expectations unfulfilled. The good news of God's kingdom was breaking out all around them – the blind could see, the lame could walk, the deaf could hear, the lepers were cleansed, the dead were raised and the poor heard good news—the kingdom was breaking out all around them, but no one seemed to notice. Their hearts were too heavy and their souls too worn out from trying to be God, from holding on to the burden of how they thought God should act and who they thought Jesus should be.

They were all way too concerned with the fact that it was not happening in the ways they expected. John was too much of a downer to be a preacher and the preparer of the way. And Jesus was too joyful to be taken seriously as a Messiah. The kingdom was breaking out all around them but no one seemed to notice because it was not happening on their terms and in the ways they would have chosen. The weight of their burdens kept their eyes on the ground. "Are we sure he is THE ONE?" they asked, the question echoing from the palace steps to the temple courtyard. "Surely, this Jesus is not THE ONE."

And Jesus looks around, sees the shoulders of his people slumped over, sees the strain in their necks and their backs, sees the heaviness of their hearts and the exhaustion of their souls. And Jesus decides to pray, apparently out loud, so perhaps both God and all those gathered around would hear.

"I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

In his prayer Jesus teaches all of us who are gathered around; hunched over with expectations unfulfilled; heads aching because we are constantly trying to be God. He teaches us that try as we might, we don't get to dictate how God will do God's job, nor even who gets to proclaim the good news. We can carry around with us all kinds of backbreaking expectations as to what God should or should not do; all kinds of soul-wearying pronouncements as to proper Messiah behavior; all kinds of plans for how the world should or should not run.

But, with his prayer, Jesus reminds us that no matter how wise or intelligent or powerful we think we are, we are not the Creator, but creatures. We are not the ones with the weight of the world on our shoulders, but the ones who rest in the palm of God's hand.

And I am sure Jesus' spoken prayer frustrated some of the people in the crowd. For they had been carrying around those heavy burdens for a very long time. Some of them had carried them around for so long, the burdens had almost become a part of them, welded together with their hearts and their souls. Secretly, they were terrified not to carry all of it around. Their burdens defined them. Their burdens made their life feel safe and controlled. They were so used to telling God what God should or should not do, who God should or should not love, what kind of Messiah Jesus should be, how the end of the world should or should not unfold. They were so used to their backbreaking burdens that they were absolutely terrified even thinking about life without them. What would they do if they were not lugging them around? Who would they be?

And after Jesus finished praying, he once again looked around him into the faces of all those gathered. And he saw the strained necks, the disappointed looks, and the glances of disapproval. He saw the slumped shoulders of people who wanted, needed, to have it all figured out and nailed down. He watched the dragging hearts of those who acted like they had it all under control, but who were really scared because they knew they did not.

And as Jesus looked around, he stretched out his arms, ready to lift all of their heavy burdens off of their backs. Ready to shoulder all of the weight that was straining their necks, wearying their souls, causing their hearts to drag. He looked around, stretched out his arms and issued his own invitation.

"Come to me." he offered. "All you that are weary and carrying those heavy burdens, come to me. All you who are tired of trying to figure it all out, come to me. All you who are tired of trying to keep life in control, come to me. All you who are simply confused and scared, lost and lonely, come to me. Come to me, and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus stretched out his arms and called for them to lay down their heavy burdens of expectations unfulfilled, of trying to be God and have it all under control. And he still stands, arms outstretched, the weight of the world on his own shoulders, and invites us to do the same. He invites all of us to lay down our burdens of religious dogmatism. He invites all of us to lay down your burdens of empty skepticism. He invites all of us to lay down our burdens of fear, our burdens of control, our burdens of shame, our burdens of anger or disappointment. Jesus stands, arms outstretched, and invites us to lay down whatever we carry that causes our shoulders to slump, our souls to grow weary, and our hearts to drag.

Jesus stands, arms outstretched, the weight of the world on his shoulders, and reminds us that he is the only one who can be God. We cannot. For our sake, he invites us to stop trying and to simply learn him, resting with the yoke of discipleship. Come to me, Jesus says. All you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. And I will give you rest for your souls.

He may not be the kind of God we always want, but he is the kind of God we always need. So lay them down. Amen.