

By Deb Richardson-Moore

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Matthew 11: 28-30

Prayer: Dear God, may we live our faith through every encounter, every relationship, every moment of our lives. Our faith was never meant to be restricted to one hour on Sunday morning. In the name you wore when you walked among us, Amen.

The Weight

Some years back, there was a little noticed “homegoing” ceremony at Watkins Garrett & Wood Mortuary on Augusta Street. Lt. Col. Paul Adams had died in Lincoln, Nebraska at age 92.

But Greenville was his home, and so there was a celebration here a month after his death.

It was a *homecoming*, if you will, combined with a *homegoing*. That’s what our African-American friends call their funeral services.

I use that phrase in every funeral I preach, because it is such a lovely way to express what we Christians believe: That at death, we are “going home” to our heavenly father.

Or, perhaps, in Lt. Col. Adams’ case, “flying home.” For Adams was a Tuskegee Airman. The Tuskegee Airmen were the first black pilots enlisted in the American military. Because of their prowess in World War II, they are credited with beginning the racial integration of our military.

Mr. Adams was born in the early 1920s, and graduated from all-black Sterling High School in 1938. That means he grew up in a Greenville that was totally segregated.

Even decades later, many of us experienced the segregated schools, segregated water fountains, segregated swimming pools, segregated lunch counters, segregated libraries. But in the 1930s, black people were not even allowed on the Greenville Army Air Base. And that was hard for a boy who wanted nothing more than to fly.

If you've seen the movies "The Tuskegee Airmen" and "Red Tails," you have an idea of the discrimination they faced. The Airmen flew fighter plane escorts for bombers. At first, the white bomber pilots didn't want them as escorts.

But the Tuskegee Airmen were so tenacious, their flying so skillful, that they earned the respect of their fellow white pilots.

Lt. Col. Adams' son, Michael, recalled playing golf one day in Nashville, Tennessee. One of the men on the course was a white man his father's age. When the older man discovered that Michael's dad was a Tuskegee Airman, he stopped playing, walked over and shook his hand.

"Be sure to give that to your father," he said.

He was a bomber pilot who made it back home, thanks to the Tuskegee Airmen.

By the end of his 92 years, Lt. Col. Paul Adams had won the Commendation Medal with three Oak Leaf clusters and the Congressional Gold Medal. He had become one of the first black public school teachers in

Lincoln, Nebraska. Along with his fellow Airmen, he had attended the inauguration of America's first black president when President Obama took office in 2009.

But all that came later. In his childhood hometown of Greenville and in his military career, Lt. Col. Adams bore the weight of racism.

Members of this congregation have borne the weight of racism. We have just given permission for Speaking Down Barriers to hold their sessions at Triune this year. Through conversation and poetry, they have been at the forefront locally of fighting the racism that continues to lurk in our society.

Others in here have borne other burdens, other weights. Parents who didn't function as parents. Poverty. Abuse. Neglect. Disease. It is the human condition.

It is a condition that our Savior chose to bear in many respects – in a hometown called Nazareth in a first-century outpost of the Roman Empire.

I hope you heard what Jacob and Taylor and

_____ and sang for us:

I pulled into Nazareth, was feelin' about half past dead

I just need some place where I can lay my head

"Hey, mister, can you tell me where a man might find a
bed?"

He just grinned and shook my hand, "no" was all he said.

Robbie Robertson, who wrote *The Weight* for The Band, says he was talking about Nazareth, Pennsylvania, not Jesus's Nazareth. But it's hard to hear this song with all its religious imagery without thinking something else was going on.

A stranger walks into Nazareth, looking for a place to lie down. The innkeeper turns him away.

The stranger sees Carmen and the Devil walkin' side by side. Carmen leaves, but her friend, the Devil, sticks around.

The stranger runs into Miss Moses and Luke, waiting for the Judgment Day.

And after every verse, sings the stranger, "Put the load right on me."

Put the load right on me.

I imagine songwriters aren't unlike preachers. People hear things that were never said, sometimes never intended.

We preachers are comfortable attributing that to the Holy Spirit. I would argue, why can't the Holy Spirit help us interpret songs? And novels? And plays? And visual art?

If our faith is more than a Sunday morning occurrence, then the Holy Spirit is at work every moment of every day.

Put the load right on me.

Are there any six words that better encapsulate our gospel? For our gospel is about a Savior who offers to bear our weight.

This morning's Scripture passage is an invitation from Jesus that sounds very much like the refrain from *The Weight*. If you'd like to read along, I'm reading from **Matthew 11: 28-30**.

28 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

I have to admit: I avoided this passage for years because I didn't know what the heck Jesus was talking about. Because he seemed to contradict what he said elsewhere.

My favorite verse, the one I had printed on my stationery, is from Mark's gospel: Jesus says, “ **'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'** ”

A cross was a means of death. Jesus was saying that to follow him we must do no less than take up the means to our death. In another place, he said the **“the gate is narrow and the road is hard.”** (Mt. 7: 14)

How, then, can his yoke be easy and his burden light? Was that not a direct contradiction?

Well, it's about *context*. All about context.

This 11th chapter of Matthew deals primarily with Israel's rejection of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. In verse 3, the foremost prophet of them all, John the Baptist, has a moment of doubt. He sends word from prison, **“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”**

In verses 7 through 19, Jesus talks about the fickleness of the unbelieving crowds.

In verses 20 through 24, he reproaches the cities that have not accepted him, and vows judgment upon them.

Then in verses 25 through 27, he talks about the Father and Son being one.

Then we hear what is sometimes called the Great Invitation:

28 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

The context is: Jesus was addressing *crowds of Jews*. If they were to follow the laws of Judaism as prescribed by the Pharisees, they would have to obey 613 laws.

But the crowds were the so-called *am haratz*, people of the land. They were farmers and shepherds and goat herders and merchants. They couldn't afford the luxury of maintaining the ritual cleanliness required to follow all those laws.

As a result, the Pharisees despised them, looked down on them as unclean.

As we know, Jesus was frequently at odds with those Pharisees. In fact, the first two stories of chapter 12 show him plucking grain on the Sabbath and healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. He was flouting the Pharisees' strict interpretation of the law.

In chapter 23, he will accuse them of tying up **“heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay(ing) them on the shoulders of others.”** (Mt. 23: 4) He will accuse them of worrying about precisely tithing agricultural products while neglecting **“the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.”** (Mt. 23: 23)

In that context of the heavy burden of Pharisaic law, he offers these crowds an alternative – belief in him, a lighter burden, an easier load.

Compared to what the Pharisees were offering, he *was* offering a lighter burden, an easier load.

Put the load right on me.

Literally, a yoke was a tool of submission for draft animals and prisoners of war. When Jesus called his yoke “easy,” the underlying Greek word meant “kind.”

Thus, a good yoke is an easy fit, *kind* to our shoulders. It is shaped to fit in order to minimize chafing.

But most importantly, as we accept Jesus’ yoke, he doesn’t let it go.

As we accept Jesus’ yoke, he doesn’t let it go.

The Pharisees, he says, “**are unwilling to lift a finger to move**” heavy burdens. (Mt. 23:4) By contrast, he becomes our yokefellow, walking alongside us, sharing our yoke, sharing our burden, sharing our weight.

A shared weight is an easier weight. A shared burden is a lighter burden.

Put the load right on me.

What is your load, your burden? What is the weight you carry?

As many of you know, the title of my first book was *The Weight of Mercy*. It’s about my first few years of ministry here. I took the title from

Matthew 23, when Jesus yelled at the Pharisees about neglecting “**the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.**” From that verse, I extrapolated the weight of dispensing mercy at the Triune Mercy Center.

That was the weight I carried.

To ease it, David Gay and Alfred Johnson and I began working to offer ways out of drug and alcohol addiction. David and his yokefellow Kreg have sent over 1,500 people into treatment. Alfred helped lure the first Narcotics Anonymous meeting here.

Since then, our NA and AA groups have grown to 11 meetings a week. And we cherish those groups, cherish the hard work they do in providing support and accountability for each other in recovery.

We’re doing this because we all carry a weight of some kind.

In the past few years, we turned our attention to women who were working in the sex trade. Our employee Beth Messick told us such

employment was almost always the result of a sexual assault back when the woman was between 7 and 11 years old.

Along with Christ Episcopal Church, we co-founded Jasmine Road as an exit ramp for those women. Beth became its director, and many of you became volunteers and directors and donors.

In February, the women of Jasmine Road will open Jasmine Kitchen, a restaurant on Augusta Street. I hope you will visit the restaurant as a way of sharing the weight carried by those residents who have suffered sexual abuse.

Put the load right on me.

Lt. Col. Paul Adams and his generation carried the weight of racism and discrimination. While that has never totally gone away, a new wave of racism and discrimination is weighing down Hispanic immigrants. A high school geography teacher named Scott Warren works on the U.S.-Mexican border, giving water and medical aid to migrants crossing the desert.

He was arrested and charged with harboring and concealing two undocumented migrants from the Border Patrol. In November, a jury acquitted him.

The judge at his trial also acquitted him of a charge of abandonment of property: He had left jugs of water for thirsty migrants. In explaining his decision, the judge cited Scott Warren's religious beliefs that compelled him to carry out this work.

Put the load right on me.

Many in our congregation carry weights of sexual abuse, mental disorders, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, anger, cancer.

We yoke to each other in lots of ways to make those weights easier to bear. Worship, lunchtime camaraderie, art, music, NA, AA, Round Table, Triune Circles.

These are ways we point to our Lord, who invited:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens....”

Put the load right on me.

Amen.