My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our hearts, minds, souls and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

The lines in our scripture today are ones we are all familiar with. Verse 28 says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest”. Verse 30 gives us another well-known line: “For my yoke is easy and my burden is light”.

These snippets are well-known because they are pulled out of the Bible and into popular culture, repeated on little inspirational cards, on gravestones, on memorial park benches and in peace gardens. Who wouldn’t agree with these sentiments? It’s a promise to all who are weary, and who among us isn’t weighed down by the time we get to adulthood and everything we have to deal with not only in our daily lives but those things that swirl beyond our control?

We want our lives more predictable. When we’re kids, we are guided by parents who help lay it out for us. Yes, you can do what you’re planning on doing, but it’s a bad idea and here’s why. When we persist, they might go a step further and let us know we’re going to hurt ourselves or others and tell us not to do it. Sometimes we might take that advice; children are good that way. Teens, not so much. By the time we reach adulthood, we are soooo beyond all the authority figures giving us this kind of guidance. We want choices and for those choices to be ours, with outcomes that are what we wish for, and for there to be no negative consequences to deal with or to clean up. We want lives that literally have no burdens whatsoever, much less ones that are light or heavy.

So it’s refreshing to know that Jesus is there to come along and be our life’s janitor, wresting this little passage out of context and letting us apply it to where we think it should be applied. “Come to me…and I will give you rest” is what we remember, right? We just put in some dots where the whole burden thing appears. We’re letting our expectations of God start to re-write the Bible for our lives. And that’s not good.

We’re just on the other side of the fourth of July holiday here, aren’t we, and it’s fitting that these words come to us at this time. New Hampshire is known for being pretty freedom-minded. But we should also know that the folks who came here to establish our towns and communities didn’t come here with hearts that were light and free. They were looking to experience God away from the kings and princes and proclamations in England and Scotland of being Catholic or Protestant on penalty of death. Imagine that: worship God this way or that, and swear the loyalty oath to an earthly master or else be killed.

That kind of experience is what is repeated in the words of Emma Lazarus at the base of the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your poor, your tired, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”. It’s embodied in the Massachusetts Irish Famine memorial on Washington Street and the “Embrace” sculpture on the Common, both in Boston.

So back to our text, what is the context of these verses? We’re in Matthew’s Gospel, not too far from where Jesus gives us the Sermon on the Mount, and there he doesn’t exactly invite us to come to him if we’re weary. Instead he ramps up discipleship and entreats us to wake up and shape up. “You have heard it said…,” he says, “But I say unto you”, he tells us, over and over.

These words are maybe lifted out of context by design, aren’t they? Our passage today come to us after John the Baptist’s arrest. We remember John—one who ate insects for breakfast and wore animal skins for clothes, always preaching stuff no one wanted to hear. John the Baptist was the no fun guy. But the same folks who ignored John for being no fun now turn on Jesus for having maybe too much fun, eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners.

Sooo…given all of this…what does it mean for us? What does it mean to be weary and carrying heavy stuff?

We want to escape and to be free from any of the oppressive expectations and consequences. Our parents sheltered us as best they could. But they also set us up for a rules-based framework of living. Do this, expect that. Live a life that is upstanding and good, and the terrible, horrible, no good very bad things will stay away. We have that freedom ethos in our bones, libertarians all are we. Please don’t tell us what to do or set limits, no big brother looking over our shoulder. We got this.

We abhor, but secretly expect, rules and outcomes that guide us predictably. The rabbi’s set of rules and lists in the ancient world, their interpretation of the torah, that was called the rabbi’s yoke. So Jesus’ Jewish followers would have recognized this. As do we: any yoke is a set of interpretations and expectations of a higher authority. But please let US follow them as we want to in New Hampshire.

What is our context? Our burdens and yokes?

* Cars that break down at the exact wrong moment.
* Dogs that nab a chocolate cake off the counter and the resulting vet bills.
* Kids who play with matches. Or follow strangers.
* Spouses who promise to love and cherish, until they don’t and won’t.
* Families that don’t understand limits, financially, spiritually, emotionally, or otherwise.
* Parents we no longer understand, but would if we weren’t so damn stubborn about our opinion of them.
* Sickness that robs our bodies and minds of vitality.
* Losses of folks we’ve known and loved that grow in number with each passing year.

So much context. So many heavy burdens. We are exasperated. And so is Jesus. So he comes with love, and is no longer making us feel shameful or lazy.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Maybe when Jesus invites us to come, all who are weary, he means us. The weary ones, judgemental to the point where we’re just done with it and angry. The weary ones who are constantly picked apart for each and every word, facial expression, or made to feel like we’re falling short. The weary ones who are judged and wear the Scarlet Letter for all to see for some long-ago thing. The weary ones who are weary of having all the answers and responsibility, or the ones weary of not knowing the consequences much less the questions. How can the world be safe for us, who have heavy burdens?

Can we be sure of one thing, just one thing, Jesus?

How about this: “I will give you rest”. It’s a promise, a release. But that rest depends on something else. It depends on a yoke. Can we libertarians stomach that, the part about the yoke? We don’t read verse 29 much, the part between giving us rest and getting the yoke. Maybe that’s the context we’re looking for.

*“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”.*

Yokes aren’t popular in our culture. But this tells us that if we are willing to learn, as children do, that we become responsible for not just ourselves, but also one another. And when that happens, our work lets others rest, and our rest makes others work. We have to trust God and Jesus to complete the circle.

Thanks be to God, Amen.