SUNDAY, JULY 5, 1987

"AN ASTOUNDING INVITATION AND PROMISE"

Matthew 11:25-30

"Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

Another translator puts the opening sentence this way:

"Come to me all you who are weary and overburdened and I will give you rest."

Ask the average person what he or she wants out of life and the individual will probably reply, "All I want is to be happy." I believe the answer. I believe that most people want to be happy. I know it because I see how hard many people work to try to find happiness. They buy books. They attend classes. They work hard at their jobs to make all the money possible so they

can buy things which they are sure will make them happy. But in spite of all this hard work, I find that many people most of the time do not feel happy.

We may have all of the things on our wish list and still feel empty. We may have reached the top of our professions and still feel that something is missing. We may know that friends and acquaintances envy us and still feel the absence of true contentment in our lives.

Because so many people work hard to find happiness, I find that instead of being happy, many individuals are tired, worn out. They are weary and overburdened. I've had many people say to me, "If only I could get some rest. If only I could get away for awhile. I wish I could lay my burden down. I wish I could find some relaxation, some rest for my soul."

There are those among us who try all sorts of quick ways to relax--some drink alcohol to attempt to relax, to find rest for their souls. Others take various kinds of pills to calm them down. However, when the effect of the alcohol or drugs wears off, the problems remain. There still is no rest

for the soul.

A true change of pace can help. Baseball experts tell us that the secret of great pitching is not speed or curves alone. Change of pace is also needed. Batters can soon learn how to hit a pitcher who always delivers the same sort of ball, but even the best batters find it hard to out-guess a pitcher who changes pace. A change of pace is what gives pitchers the edge. The same secret is true of life. Jesus knew this. That is why he frequently took time off. He went away into the hills to pray. He also kept the Sabbath because he needed the change of pace that regular worship provides.

For those of us whose jobs do not provide much physical activity, some sort of exercise can help provide a change of pace and even give some rest to our souls.

Here's what one physician wrote about walking as a way to relax. "I first began walking as a means of escape, a way to get away from artifical lights and into the fresh air. After hours in the office, with nothing but a fluorescent ceiling to light my way, I found it refreshing to take a

half-hour walk outside at lunch time, to breathe the fresh air and to feel the sun. I found that another half-hour walk in the cool night was a exhilarating way to unwind. I'll never forget the feeling I got one winter night, as I walked along the deserted streets after many hours at the hospital. I suddenly realized that I didn't feel cold or tired. All the worries about my patients' illnesses, as well as my own personal cares, seemed to recede with each step. The profound fatigue that I'd experienced as I left the hospital seemed to evaporate into the atmosphere as quickly as the smoky vapor of my own breath disappearing into the night."

If you ask people why it's so difficult to relax and let go, some blame it on the environment, on forces outside themselves. They say things like, "Life is so complicated these days. There's so much that needs to be done." And there's some truth in this. It has been said that most of us get more stimulation per square hour than used to be given per square day to our grandparents.

This explanation leads people to turn wistfully in some moments to thoughts of a quiet South Sea Island, or to the horse and

buggy days of their great grandparents. But as Thomas Kelly, the Quaker Mystic discovered when he visited the South Sea Islands: "I found that Americans carry into the tropics their same madcap feverish life which they knew on the mainland." Thus Kelly concluded that the complexity of our program cannot be totally blamed on the complexity of our environment.

So we need more than change of pace and change of environment, as important as these might be, to find true rest for our souls.

Thus it is that in these words of Jesus, we are given an astounding invitation and promise for finding rest. "Come unto me, all who are weary and overburdened and I will give you rest."

What does it mean to "Come to Jesus?" How does one do that? Jesus himself gives the answer. He said: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

A yoke is a device that fits around the

necks of a pair of animals so that they can work together and pull a plow or some other object. In Jesus' time, a yoke usually was used with a team of oxen. Thus a yoke was a symbol of submission. So Jesus was saying to the people of his day and to us--submit to me, follow me, learn from me and I will give you the direction in life that you need in order to live as God would have you live.

Jesus was implying too that all of us have other yokes on our necks which we need to get rid of in order to take his yoke upon us. And he promises us that in comparison to the yokes we usually wear, that his yoke is easy and his burden light.

What are some of the yokes that many of us wear that become heavy burdens to us--so much so that we are always weary and worn out?

In Jesus' time, the practice of religion itself had become a burden almost too heavy to bear for many people. There were so many religious rules to follow, so many details to be aware of that instead of religion being a joy, it had become a heavy load.

I meet people today for whom religion is a heavy yoke on their neck. They are always worried about satisfying God, about appeasing God's anger, about earning God's love and acceptance.

For all such people, these words of Jesus are words of comfort. "Come to me, all who are weary and overburdened with the demands of your religion, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

What hard and heavy yoke are you carrying which you need to put down before you accept the yoke of Christ? Perhaps you are weighed down with guilt for something you have done. If so, take that yoke off and take the yoke of Christ upon you in its place.

Or maybe you are carrying the yoke of excessive fear and deep anxiety. Your worries are wearing you down. They are heavy and almost impossible to bear. Leave them here this morning. I meet more and more people for whom excessive worry is at the center of their living. It's a heavy yoke.

I meet people who worry about whether or not they are liked and accepted by others; whether or not they have value and are worthwhile.

To all such, Jesus says, "Come unto me all who are weary and overburdened with worry and I will give you rest. Lay aside your yoke of worry and take my yoke upon you, and learn from me."

What do we learn from Jesus? We learn to see all of life in a new perspective. We learn to see all of life as connected with God, and we learn that just as God was in Christ, God is also in us and in others as well, no matter who they are.

We learn that much of the pain, discomfort and mental suffering we go through doesn't have to exist because there is no basis for it in reality. Much of our worry and the pain and suffering that go with it is based on a false image in our minds of what life is all about.

Think how much time we all spend on seeking wealth, fame, glamor, power, social influence, status and collecting and buying more and more things to have around us. Such pursuits

become a heavy burden and can lead us to become uptight, disgruntled, despondent and nervous. In seeking such values we become abusive, obstinate, domineering and self-righteous. It's no wonder we become weary and overburdened and seek rest.

A recent issue of Fortune magazine tells about a man named George Sieber who thought he had everything. Still, deep down he knew that he was weary and overburdened. Mr. Sieber had a successful personnel agency in New York City and a large pizza business in New Jersey, but a lot was missing. Here's how he put it in his own words: "I had all the things people said I was supposed to have--four houses, three cars, a great business. But I didn't have the things I wanted in my heart; a good marriage and children. My wife didn't want children because she said I was too volatile."

According to the article, he had a mean temper. He blistered employees who made mistakes and fumed outrageously when things went wrong. He had a high turnover rate in personnel. He had developed the habit of smoking three packs of cigarettes a day and drinking a pint of Scotch each night. He constantly fought with his wife.

Finally his wife could take it no longer. Not wanting to lose her, he quit smoking and drinking and spent some $60,000 on marriage counseling. But in the end, she decided to divorce him anyway.

In misery and desperation, he turned to reading the Bible, searching for help. Something began to happen. He read and re-read the text for this morning's sermon. His life began to change radically. He accepted the astounding invitation of Jesus: "Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." He began to learn from the ways of Jesus. Before long, he and his wife were reconciled and within a year they had their first child. He learned to let Christ control his vicious temper. What once made him explode in fury doesn't seem to ruffle him anymore. His employees testify that they have noticed a great difference in him.

This invitation is open to all of us. Believe it. Accept it. Come to me all who are weary and overburdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. AMEN.