Sunday, July 8, 1990

"UNCONDITIONAL HOSPITALITY"

Matthew 11:25-30

Above the two large front doors of the main entrance of this church building are written some of the most beautiful words in all the New Testament. "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." Another translation says it this way: "Come to me all you who are weary and overburdened and I will give you rest." Jesus then went on to say, "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." That's quite a promise.

These words spoken by Jesus are an invitation to all people, and that includes each one of you listening now. According to Jesus, there are no exceptions. All are invited. All are welcome. These words tell us of God's unconditional hospitality and they also remind us that a primary task of the church is to practice the same kind of hospitality. We are especially to reach out to people who are weary and overburdened.

But before we talk about the church and how it can carry out the unconditional hospitality which Jesus offers, lets examine this invitation of Jesus and see how it applies to us as individuals.

Are you weary? Do you sometimes feel overburdened? I find that our everyday life is filled with people who feel tired and worn out. I meet people every day who tell me in many different ways that their lives lack meaning and purpose. They feel both empty and overburdened at the same time. I know that's why many people come on a Sunday to our worship services, or listen on the radio or watch on television.

Each week I carefully review the Prayer Request cards that come in the offering plate so that our staff and the prayer group can remember in prayer those who request us to do so. The messages that individuals write on these cards underscores the fact that many come here on Sunday morning because they are weary and overburdened Someone wrote: "Sometimes I feel like I just can't go on and I don't think I can stand the pressure of another day. Would you please remember me in your prayers and those like me. Is it possible to die from loneliness and a broken heart?"

A child wrote, "Please pray for my grandpa. He's lonely, my grandma died."

A young woman wrote. "I need a prayer bad. I'm pregnant."

Someone else wrote, "Help me to heal and not to hate because of the affair. Pray hard, I'm desperate."

Another card said, "I have a chronic incurable disease, pray for healing, please. My daughter probably inherited it from me. My son is a Viet Nam vet and very disturbed. My spouse is an alcoholic. Please pray for all of us."

One card simply said, "God help _____, just because he's ugly to the bone."

Look around you this week. Have you noticed how hard people work to try to make some sense out of life? No wonder they are tired. Some work hard at their jobs to make all the money possible so they can buy things which they are sure will fill some of the emptiness they are experiencing.

On the other hand, I know people who have acquired most of the items on their wish list and still feel empty--people who have reached the top of their professions and yet are aware that something is missing. And so they are empty, weary and overburdened.

I've had 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 rest for my soul."

There are those among us who try all sorts of ways to do that. Some use alcohol, others take various kinds of pills, but when the effect wears off, the emptiness, the heaviness remains. There is still no rest for their souls.

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 such as, "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 today get more stimulation per square hour than used to be given per square day to our grandparents.

This explanation leads some of us to turn wistfully to thoughts of a quiet South Sea Island, or to the horse and buggy days of our great grandparents. We look back to a time when life was simpler. Yet deep down when we are honest with ourselves, we know that's not the answer.

Thomas Kelly, the Quaker mystic, when he visited some of the South Sea Islands found some Americans there who were seeking rest for their souls, but Kelly said, "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 lives cannot be totally blamed on the complexity of our environment.

So it is that we need to hear this invitation from Jesus over and over again. "Come to 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 gave 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 piece of equipment. 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.

What can we learn from him? Earlier in the same Gospel of Matthew, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reminded his followers of some of the things we can learn from him.

For example: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is there will your heart be also."

"No one can serve two masters; for either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." Many of us try to serve even more than two masters.

Jesus also said, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."

There's so much we can learn from Jesus. Another example: take time at least on Sunday for the worship of God. Jesus always went to the synagogue on the Sabbath, and he went apart at other times as well for prayer. It helps put your whole life into proper perspective again.

Take the yoke of Jesus upon you and learn from him. He was also implying that all of us have other yokes on our necks which we need to lay aside in order to take his yoke upon us. And the promise is that in comparison to the yokes we usually wear, his yoke is easy and the burden is light.

Look at your life now. What are some of the yokes you are wearing that have become heavy burdens? 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 to carry.

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

For all such people these words of Jesus need

to be especially heard--"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, remember God has already forgiven you--accept that forgiveness and lay your yoke of guilt aside. Then take upon you the yoke which Jesus offers.

Or maybe you are carrying the yoke of excessive fear and worry and your anxieties are wearing you down. It's a heavy load and almost impossible to bear. If so leave that yoke here this morning, and take the yoke which Jesus offers instead. Then you will find rest for your soul.

I meet people all the time who feel worthless and not liked or accepted by others. To all such Jesus said, "Come to me all you who are weary and overburdened and I will give you rest. 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 see all of life as connected with God and we learn that just as God was in Jesus, God is also in us and in others.

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 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. It's no wonder we become weary and worn out.

"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." This invitation is open to all of us. It speaks of God's unconditional hospitality. God is always ready to welcome us.

And since the church is to be the body of Christ in our world, it means that as a church we are to practice unconditional hospitality. As an institution and as individuals we are to be Jesus in the world, so this invitation becomes our invitation to others. We are especially to reach out to people who are weary and overburdened. We have it inscribed about our main doors to remind us.

What are some of the ways in which we carry

out this unconditional hospitality as a congregation? First of all, hopefully we welcome and try to help feel at home all people who come through our church doors. We hope that in this place they will find rest for their souls.

Secondly, we know that a lot of people who are weary and overburdened are so much so that they do not make it to this church building--so we reach out to them through radio and through television. I am continually astonished at the mail we get each week from our radio listeners and television viewers. The letters tell us of having experienced our hospitality. People write to say they have found rest for their souls because of having experienced our worship. They write of now feeling they are loved and accepted by God.

Thirdly, we have been practicing God's unconditional hospitality through our ministry in the person of the Rev. Nancy Erickson at the Lancaster County Jail here in Lincoln. The men and women to whom she ministers are truly the weary and heavyladen.

Fourthly, there is our continued ministry through the Daywatch Center for the homeless in downtown Lincoln. We are simply trying to live out the motto which is above our main church doors--"Come to me you who are weary and overburdened and I will give you rest." And the people come and keep coming. It's all a part of God's unconditional hospitality.