

Fr. Curtis Miller July 8-9, 2023 Homily for the 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I was in the Boy Scouts when I was growing up, and one of the activities we did a lot was go for camping or backpacking trips. Before you went out on a trip, it was important that you carefully go over the packing list and remember to bring your map and compass, rain gear, a change of clothes, food and cooking utensils, and a first aid kit. The motto was “Be Prepared,” so you had to pack enough to be ready for everything, but not pack too much because you have to carry it all on your back.

In our spiritual journeys through life, we have to be sure to pack enough, but not too much extra stuff that just weighs us down.

Jesus’ yoke is easy and His burden is light. But there still is a burden, we still have to carry our crosses. Anyone who tells you differently is deceiving you. There are things we need to carry: a life of prayer, faithfully following God’s commandments, receiving the Sacraments, studying the Bible and the teachings of our Faith, performing good works, and being kind.

But what are the extra things we carry which only weigh us down? One of the heaviest burdens we can carry is trying to keep up our reputations, to try to impress others with all our accomplishments. We can base our whole identity on this constructed reputation we build up for ourselves, instead of just being authentic and humble. If we cling to Jesus and get our sense of self from just being a beloved daughter or son of God, regardless of our accomplishments, and redeemed by Jesus, regardless of our sins and shortcomings, we will feel lighter.

We can also be burdened by thinking we know everything. I’m reminded of a famous book by David Halberstam, called *The Best and the Brightest*, about government leaders in the 1960s, the smartest and most talented people in the world, the experts, who made disastrous decisions about the conduct of the Vietnam War. When we think we know everything, we are blind to the things we don’t know, and we can stumble into some terrible mistakes. A healthy dose of humility goes a long way. That’s why Jesus praises the childlike, who humbly receive the knowledge of the Kingdom that God gives to them.

This is not anti-intellectualism, which makes the same mistake as the pride of thinking you know everything, but in the opposite direction. The Church needs theologians and experts to deepen our knowledge of God. But it can’t be knowledge for its own sake, or to puff up our egos. That’s why the Church canonized St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the smartest people who ever lived, who wrote libraries full of learned works, yet who at the end of his life humbly acknowledged that all his writings were “like so much straw” in comparison of the wonders of God.

I'm also reminded of a passage in C.S. Lewis' book, *The Great Divorce*, which is about the separation of Heaven and Hell. In this passage, two souls are on their way to the afterlife. A brilliant theologian is going on and on, talking about Jesus, while soul of a genuinely devout man bows his head, humbly and lovingly, each time the other said the name of Jesus. One knew a lot *about* Jesus; the other knew *Jesus* and loved Him.

We can also be weighed down by bodily hungers and desires, as St. Paul refers to in our second reading today. This is not to suggest a false dualism of body vs. soul; the Church's teaching is not "flesh equals bad" and "spirit equals good." God made us human beings a composite of body and soul. Both are good. But we have to realistically remember that the flesh is weak, and it can tend to pull the soul down with its selfish concerns. Instead, we can foster a life of the spirit, through prayer, works of charity, and simple penances like fasting some days, in order to strengthen our souls to become like a lifejacket, buoying up our bodily selves. The body is programmed to survive, so it wants food, rest, and other comforts. It desires more than it could possibly need, which is fine for most people in the world and most people throughout history. The problem is that you and I live in the midst of luxuries unimaginable to most of humanity. That leaves us like a horse, left on its own with unlimited hay, grain, and water, which will eat and drink itself to death. We have to discipline these appetites, so that the body doesn't take over, and then ruin both body and soul.

If we Christians still have to carry a burden, and one that can take the form of heavy crosses, then how can Jesus say that His burden is light? Because Jesus Himself helps us carry those crosses. Jesus criticized the Pharisees who burdened people with an overwhelming multitude of spiritual practices, yet did not lift a finger to help people carry them. Jesus wasn't criticizing the spiritual practices as much as He was criticizing how these leaders didn't help people carry them out. Jesus came down from Heaven, became man, and carried His cross for us, so that we would know that He will always be at our side to help us carry our burdens.

Some of you might remember the story of Father Flanagan, who founded Boys Town as a home for orphans and troubled kids. One of the most famous stories that came from Boys Town tells about a visitor who saw one boy carrying another, who had been crippled by polio. The visitor asked, "Isn't he heavy?" And the boy cheerfully responded, "He ain't heavy; he's my brother." Love helps us carry any burden. Carrying a burden with and for one we love, in this case Jesus, makes the burden sweet and light.

Jesus doesn't promise to take away all of our burdens in this life, because Jesus never lies or makes false promises to us. Instead, Jesus promises to help lighten our loads by helping us to carry them, and by sweetening them with love. That truly is a message that can refresh us who labor and are heavy burdened as we journey through this life, toward our goal of reaching home with Jesus in Heaven.