

Sermon Text from the 48th Annual Diocesan Convention of the Central Gulf Coast

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Matthew 11:28-30

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Life is good and I am happy! But this has not always been the case. Throughout my life there have been ups and downs, and times when I wasn't sure how I would make it through the day. So, for you to understand my glory you must first know my story. My Christian journey has taken me down many paths. Scripture tells us "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, and I reasoned like a child." Part of that reasoning was bouncing from church to church because my friends were there, or it was the "place to be." I was sprinkled in the Catholic Church, baptized in the AME Church once, the Missionary Baptist Church twice, and the Southern Baptist Church once. I thought like a child. However, "When I became a man, I gave up my childish ways."

Like most, I was seeking a sense of belonging, a place to fit in, and a place to call home. Since my church hopping days were behind me, when I was asked by one of my elementary school kids parents to apply for a position, I politely informed her that I had a church job and was not looking for another church. I had become a man.

There is a saying that's familiar to many of us, "With age comes wisdom." And in that wisdom comes a greater understanding. An understanding of the world in which we live. And more importantly, an understanding of who we are. But sometimes, who we are is *not* who the world wants us to be. And this may lead to undue stress and heavy burdens. Recently, I have seen the heavy burdens many of our brothers and sisters have had to endure. We have mocked those who are different from us. We have not taken care of the least among us. We have marginalized the poor, the destitute, and those who seek a better life. Their burdens are heavy.

I have also been reminded of my own burdens. You see, when we try to be who society wants us to be and not who God calls us to be, it creates conflict, strife, and struggles. Oftentimes, we try to conform to societal norms. But if that's not who we are, the load gets heavy.

I was born during a time when the expectations for a Black man were not very high. You see, growing up in the housing projects of Auburn, Alabama, the opportunities for me were limited. Conforming to social norms would have led to me being incarcerated or dead. Being told "you're not going to amount to anything" weighted heavy on a young Black man who often heard his mother say to his older brothers, "be careful, the State Troopers are out tonight." My brothers were not a trouble makers. However, the Alabama State Troopers posed an existential threat to a young black man. That threat continues today. And parents of young black men continue to have "the talk" on how to respond to law enforcement. So, the day that I was born, the toil and burden were heavy.

Coming to the realization that you are different, that your life's path is not going to be what is expected, and trying to hide or keep secret who you are is frightening. And if I am found out, will I lose my job, be disowned by my family, or not be welcomed at my church? The struggle was real, and is still real today.

But the world's expectations were not the end of my story. Even though I was not looking for a new church job, I was honored to have been asked to interview. I was offered the job and I accepted. This was my first experience with the Episcopal Church. My first Sunday there, one of the choir members guided me through the service using the Red Book of Common Prayers and the Blue 1982 Hymnal. There was a lot of kneeling and standing. But the thing that I remember most about my first service was communion. IT WAS REAL WINE! I wasn't expecting there to be real wine in that "cup." I listened and I learned, but I still was not sure about this place. During the summer months I attended the other church because I did not have to work at the Episcopal Church. I had become a man and I thought as a man. However, the day that I became uncomfortable in my church was the day I sought information to be confirmed into the Episcopal Church. I felt as if I had been kidnapped as a child and I was finally at home. A heavy burden had been lifted.

"Come to me ALL you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Not just White men, but ALL. Not just the well to do, but ALL. Not just the most educated, but ALL. ALL people, whether you are black, white, brown, lesbian, gay, bi, Trans, questioning, straight, man, woman, or child. Come to me ALL! Period. Full stop!

"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. For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light." Life together. The Episcopal Church. Episcopalians, working together. Making the load easier for all. This is encouraging. And this is where I belong.

And now, my brothers and sisters, my fellow Christians, my unapologetic Episcopalians, because we are in this life together, and you know some of my story, I hope you can now understand my glory. Thanks be to God!