Stress

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Matthew 11:28-30

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Aesop’s Fables is a collection of 700 fables credited to a Greek slave and storyteller named Aesop dating back to the 6th century BC. These fables function much like short stories to impart a moral lesson.

In one such fable, a man from Athens watches Aesop play marbles with children. The man regards playing games with children a frivolous activity and chides Aesop for doing so. Aesop responds by removing the strings from his musical instrument and placing it on the ground. He asks the man whether he can solve the riddle of the unstrung bow. The man cannot explain the riddle. Aesop explains the riddle this way, “If you keep a bow strung tight, it will eventually break.”

Go back to my earlier conversation with our children about guitar strings. If you tighten guitar strings too much, they will break. If you keep your life strung tight all the time, you will break also. This is what too much stress will do to us.

We are talking about Pressure Points this summer. In previous Sundays, we examined the pressures associated with fear, anxiety and depression. Stress is next in our series of Pressure Points. There is good stress and bad stress. I will come back to this thought later in this sermon.

There are all sorts of remedies put forward to reduce stress—breathing techniques, aromatherapy, reducing caffeine intake or taking oil supplements. While these practices are good as far as they go, I prefer Jesus’ remedy for reducing stress: “Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).
“Come to me,” Jesus says. Christianity at its core is a relationship with the person of Jesus. Not “do this” or “do that” but “Come to me.” “Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.”

With regard to this matter of burden, the two stories in chapter 12 that follow Jesus’ invitation are addressed to religious leaders called Pharisees. Both stories deal with the petty legalism of the Pharisees that grew up around Sabbath-keeping. The first is a story about plucking grain from the field on the Sabbath (12:1-8). The second concerns a sheep that has fallen into a pit on the Sabbath that requires rescue (12:9-14). God creates Sabbath for our rest and renewal, yet these Pharisees have turned it into a burden with all its accompanying rules and regulations. Later in Matthew, we read that the Pharisees, “tie up heavy burdens and put them on people’s shoulders yet refuse to lift a finger to help them” (23:4).

Jesus continues, “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” (Matthew 11:29-30). A yoke is a harness for two animals used in plowing and pulling heavy loads. What a sweet invitation. Jesus invites us to become yoked together with him. He claims that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. *Easy* is a word in the Greek that means well-fitted. His yoke fits us well.

It seems contradictory for Jesus to tell people already weary and burdened with life to take on a new yoke and
burden as the way to find rest. Yet, Jesus’ yoke does not add to our burden. He lessens them.

I said earlier, there is good stress and bad stress. Not all stress is bad for us. Some stress is actually good for us.

I came across a new word this week—eustress. The prefix “eu” equates to something good and beneficial. Good stress motivates us to achieve goals and meet new challenges. Some of life’s greatest joys are stressful in a good way—getting married, having a baby, starting a new job or going to college.

Distress is a word that expresses negative, harmful stress. It is a word that literally means to pull apart. Distress creates long-term anxiety. It saps our mental capacities and puts our health at serious risk. Our goal this morning is to seek remedies for the bad kind of stress.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Two applications come to mind this morning.

First application: Take steps to de-stress your life. Some stress is self-induced. We create stress. We bring it on ourselves. We are the ones who choose to keep insanely busy schedules. We are the ones who make our lives needlessly complex. We are the ones who shuttle kids from one skill-enhancing activity to the next.

We hear a lot these days about the dangers associated with secondhand smoke. What about the dangers associated with secondhand stress?
Dr. Ellen Galinsky has conducted extensive research on stress in families. Some years ago, she did a thorough study with a thousand youth ranging in age from 8-18. She asked students, “If you were granted one wish to change the way your mother’s or father’s work affects you, what would that wish be?”

You might have expected their wish would have something to do with parents spending more time with their children. Actually, the number one wish children had for their parents was wanting them to become less tired and less stressed. I repeat, children and youth wanted their parents to become less stressed and less tired. Find out what it is stressing you and take steps to reduce it.

I have one practical suggestion on how you can de-stress your life. Take seriously the biblical invitation to practice Sabbath-keeping. God does not intend us to work 24/7. The biblical principle at the very least is 24/6.

God models Sabbath rest in the story of creation. We read, “In six days the Lord God made the heavens and the earth. On the seventh day, he rested and was refreshed” (Exodus 31:17). God rested on the seventh day and was refreshed. God built rest into the very fabric of human life. Rest has wonderfully restorative properties. God created Sabbath for our benefit. Keeping the Sabbath was never intended to add to our burden. Jesus
said, “The Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Second application. Take Jesus up on his offer to come to him. His offer to come to him is still on the table. 
“Come to me and I will give you rest.”

**Take Jesus up on His offer to come to Him.**

It reminds me of a story about a man walking down the road with a heavy burden on his back. A farmer comes along with a horse and wagon. The farmer invites the man to ride in his wagon. The man gladly obliges and climbs into the wagon, yet insists on keeping the heavy load on his shoulders. The farmer asks the man why he doesn’t lay down his burden in the wagon. The man tells the farmer he does not want to burden the horse any more than it is already burdened.

The moral to the story is that the burden is the same to the horse, whether the man keeps it on his shoulders or lays it down in the wagon. You can insist on carrying your own burden or lay it down with Jesus. Take Jesus up on his offer to come to him.

Earlier in worship, you heard a number of new, contemporary songs our children learned in Vacation Bible School. One of the songs they learned, *’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus*, is an old song made new. Louisa Stead wrote
this hymn in 1800, nearly 140 years ago. It was the only hymn she ever wrote. It also originated from personal tragedy in her life. We will first sing the hymn in the original style it was written. Then we will sing it a second time in the upbeat manner our children learned in Vacation Bible School this week.

’Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus,
Just to take him at his Word.
Just to rest upon His promise,
Just to know, “Thus saith the Lord.”

I’m so glad I learned to trust Him,
Precious Jesus, Savior, Friend.
And I know that He is with me,
Will be with me to the end.

Take Jesus up on His offer to come to Him.