



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## Sermon

### My doctor told me to take it easy for UU 2 June 2019

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#### Intro

I got this sermon idea from my doctor.

When I saw her a couple of weeks ago, she said you need to take it easy.

She was talking about the heart attack I had last July.

And of me often being exhausted with legal campaigning.

But taking it easy is not easy.. I **told her I can't stop doing my court case against Bible in Schools**. But I could see a break in it coming up. Tanya and I had a case management conference at the high court last Tuesday, and I reckoned it would probably set a date for our hearing, maybe next year, so there wouldn't be much work to be done until then. She wished me well.

So obviously I'm no expert in this matter. In fact I'm a problem case.

But I'd like to share some things about it and invite you to give your answers, if you have any

#### My first thought was a saying of Jesus, that is about taking it easy

Jesus once said: Come to me, all you who labour and are weary and burdened, 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 (Matthew 11.28-30 NIV").

That sounds too good to be true. In fact I remember a sermon about this by liberal Christian philosopher Paul Tillich, about 50 years ago. And Marion still had a copy of it.

Tillich said Jesus **can't** take away our labour... we still have stuff we must do. But he said he could remove some of the stress of it, because it comes from religion.

I wondered if this could **really** be what Jesus meant; getting rid of religion is a modern idea, not that common in Jesus' time.

And I recalled other commentators who said a yoke was something farmers put on a work animal to help them pull their load. And if the yoke fitted well, it

spread the load across the animal's shoulders, but if it fitted badly, it would cause a lot of pain. And these commentators said that as a carpenter, Jesus would have **made these yokes**.... and he's saying he knew how to make them less painful.

### Kinds of religion that cause pain

So on reflection, I think this interpretation is right, because there are types of religion that cause pain, and Matthew's gospel quotes some of them. He quoted another saying of Jesus about heavy burdens, and he said damn you scribes and pharisees. **You tie up heavy burdens and lay them on the shoulders of others, but you yourselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.**

Some of these burdens that Matthew records were religious duties that were hard for people to do, like paying tithes, or keeping the Jewish food laws, or making money by working for the Romans, and then being condemned for it. Jesus thought the Jewish rules about washing your hands before meals was a pain, so he didn't do it.

Some liberal Jews today **lighten** those loads. I remember one saying she didn't worry much about kosher food, when they are visiting other people, but if they are worried they take their own.

But other Jews in Jesus' time **liked** the laws; they gave them a sense identity in a hostile world, and they **even called this a yoke**, and they said carrying the yoke of the law can make other yokes unimportant, like the yoke of their country being occupied by Romans.

So Jesus was not the only person talking about having a yoke that reduces your stress and helps you cope with pressure.

In the same way, there have been a number of debates about **Muslim** customs that cause pain lately, like women having to wear headscarves. But other Muslim have chimed in and said it is not a pain for them, and they choose it as a sign of modesty. Nobody makes them do it.

So this idea of the pressures of life being like a yoke is quite controversial. There are quite different yokes for Christianity, Judaism and Islam - and no doubt other religions as well. Some of these yokes seem easy and some seem hard.

### Another kind of pain caused by religion is guilt

Clay was talking about racism a few weeks ago and I was quite surprised to hear one of our members reply that he was **born a racist**. I think he was talking about being born white, and inheriting privileges compared with Maori and other ethnic groups, and feeling we had to do something about it.

I may be quoting this person wrong, but it sounded to me like he was talking of a yoke of guilt.

That is very similar to an ancient idea that humans were all born guilty from the sins they inherited from Adam and Eve. This is not an idea I find very helpful.

**So I would say: I personally don't feel guilty about being white,** but I do feel quite a bit of **pressure** to feel guilty, from other religious people.

**And I feel a similar pressure to feel guilty about sexism,** as though I must do something to end it.

**I do feel a sense of obligation,** to avoid disrespect like this, and to support political moves to remove the disadvantage many people have. But **I don't feel it's my personal fault. That is a heavy burden that I don't want to carry**

What do you think?

### Guilt over alcoholism ...

**I was brought up with a similar sense of guilt over alcohol.** The Methodist church that I was brought up in was strongly against even **moderate** drinking when I was young, and we took this on as our personal responsibility. So we never went to parties that had alcohol, we never went to the pub after work. We missed out on a part of our community life, because of this requirement. And I personally broke away from this obligation when I was a minister about 25 years old.

It happened when I was at wedding reception, where alcohol was provided and a drunk guy came up and said: I'm proud of you reverend, making a stand against alcohol. I thought I'm here for a party, not to provide an example, so I had my first drink. (and I've been drinking ever since)

The excuse the church gave us for saying we must not have a drop of wine was a quotation of some remarks by St Paul, **that we should not do anything that would be a stumbling block for other people for whom drink is a problem.** We should not add to their burden.

Do we have that kind of responsibility today? Looking back I can see that a case can be made for reducing our use of alcohol. But at that time it looked to me like a yoke I didn't want to wear..

**But you don't have to be religious to have this kind of problem, of pressures of life, made worse by social pressure.**

Many people face pressure to be perfect.

The pressure to compete with others.

The pressure to make enough money to live

The pressure of your own expectations..... some of the most demanding tasks seem never ending. And I include my own religious campaign. It is a killer

## The pressure of other people's expectations.

So a lot of the pressure on us comes not just from work, but from **the pressure of other people's expectations. This can be a burden, even if you agree with these people... you feel you are letting them down.**

**They can be even more of a burden when their expectations go against your own.**

I recall when I told Marion my doctor had told me to take it easy, she said - that's your legal campaign. I felt I was under attack and I thought:

- 1) One. I **like** my campaign; it gives me a great sense of purpose and satisfaction. I don't like the pressure, but it is party of the package. And I also thought:
- 2) Two. **Marion herself is highly overworked** with church committees that she leads, sometimes three or more of them in a week, some lasting for a day or more. She is **one overworked person** advising another overworked person. Maybe I need a **different** perspective on this.

## Which brings me back to Nasruddin

And **I got a different perspective, from this morning's story about Nasruddin and his donkey.** It seems absolutely everybody has some advice about how we should direct our lives .... we will never please everybody.

And like Nasruddin, we all need to have the confidence to trust our own judgement, and choose our own yoke. **That feeling of confidence can make our yoke easier to bear.**

So I reckon that this is one of the key parts to making our load more bearable ... to think carefully about our chief goals:

- 1) whether we **are** biting off more than we can chew,
- 2) whether we are being perfectionist and unrealistic,
- 3) whether we need to delegate.
- 4) whether we need to be firm with other people who are trying to put their priorities on our shoulders.
- 5) Whether we need to change
- 6) Or whether we like some of these pressures, and the sense of achievement that goes with them.

These are all difficult tasks, that we need to address before it gets easier.

But to achieve them, we need to identify our own key goals. we need to choose a yoke that fits our necks, not somebody else's.

So we can learn this from Nasruddin.

But St Paul identified this solution as well

In the book of Romans, chapter 14m verse 4, Paul discussed people who had different goals, within the same church. Some of them came from a Jewish background, and still stuck to the Jewish traditions. Others came from a Greek background, and didn't want to bother with things like Jewish food laws, or keeping the Sabbath.

And these two groups were being very judgemental about the other group.

And Paul said to them all: **who are you to pass judgement on someone else's servant. It is before their own lord that the stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.**

And he referred to some of their different lifestyles:

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully **convinced in their own minds**. 6 Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain also give thanks to God..

So, Paul said: **Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister.... instead, resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.**

Now ironically, that is the very verse that our Methodist total abstainers used to say we should not drink, in case it harmed our alcoholic friend.

But in fact Paul was saying the opposite: If we are a drinker we should not condemn the abstainer, and if we are an abstainer we should not condemn the drinker.

**It is by tolerance, that we offer support to one another.**

A Unitarian standard

**And tolerance is also a Unitarian guideline.**

- **Our third principle is freedom of thought, and the unspoken other half of it is:**
- **We should respect other people's freedom of thought, when it is different from our own.**

If we can do that, this will really be a community where one person builds up another person's self esteem, and where our different goals will be an asset, rather than a liability.

Some modern examples

- 1) I was in a discussion with some atheists who had no respect for Muslims who wore the burka. And I was going to say, don't be so bigoted.... but I stopped in time and said isn't that assuming that burkas cause the same

problems here that they do in Iran? And we had a reasonable discussion. I recognised his opinion was different from mine, but I didn't condemn him for it.

- 2) And in the same conversation another atheist disagreed with me being friendly to Muslims, but he did it very gently. He didn't condemn me. He simply said he himself could not identify with Muslims.
- 3) A third example: a week ago in our church annual meeting, we were debating whether to charge a minimum donation before someone could have voting rights on the annual meeting, and I voted against it. Someone asked me afterwards why I voted no. So I told her, **but my reason for not speaking about it at the annual meeting was I had already spoken about it twice previously, and I didn't want to rub it in, by condemning people who voted the other way.**
- 4) A fourth example: When we had that discussion about racism a few weeks ago, I was a bit concerned that we were **labelling whole blocks of people as racists** ... as if all shades of feeling about other groups were wrong... The label racist, I believe, is too strong to apply to everybody on the conservative side of a magic line. At the top end of the spectrum: There are some people who advocate violence against other ethnic groups; toning down a little there are, some who denigrate people from other groups. Then there are, some who just have rather limited awareness of their needs, and some, like Don Brash, don't want them to have special legal privileges.... **Not all these people deserve to be condemned as racists. Occasionally we should confront them. But condemnation should not be our main way of dealing with them.**
- 5) We should not use the slippery slope argument as a way of condemning all of these people, because of the bigotry of some of them.. **If we do that, we are showing our prejudice, not theirs.**
- 6) **So if we are being sensitive to people who are in another ethnic group, I believe we should also be sensitive to other people who disagree with us ... and listen more carefully to what concerns them.**

### Some ways of helping to cope with overload

- 1) One is to have an accepting group of friends, who care about each other.
- 2) One is to join pressure groups with others who share our priorities.
- 3) And fitness is also a cure for stress. Thanks to my heart attack, I've just got a green card that gives me half-price access to the gym, also to a nearly swimming pool, and I can also get professional advice from a physio. All of these for only \$5 a time.
- 4) One is personal disciplines like prayer, and meditation. I used to get a lot of help from praying about things that concerned me, and even after I

became an atheist I sometimes found myself doing this – not because I expected some magical help from God: it was just a way thinking through my concerns – the way we do here by lighting a candle for things that are on our mind: it's like prayer without expecting a divine answer.

## Summary

But all of them hinge on the point that Nasruddin dealt with ... that there are many people who have different ideas about how we live, but ultimately

**1) we need to make key decisions ourselves.**

**2) Other people can help, but only if they respect that key role of personal freedom.**

## Coda

I must report also, that sometimes an answer comes completely out of the blue.

For me, that happened in our court conference in Tuesday. My colleague Tanya Jacob and I were very tense going into the hearing, because we had 18 witnesses, and we knew:

- 1) the opposition, the attorney general, was going to try to limit us to three,
- 2) and that wouldn't include me, because I have no children at a state primary school. I would go through all this hassle, with no right to speak my point of view!!

The answer came very swiftly:

- 1) The Attorney-General made his case that we should only have three witnesses.
- 2) Then the barrister for the Human Rights Commission said, this trouble had hit us because we had originally lodged our case with the Human Rights Review Tribunal, where they don't have such strict rules. She said the High Court has the power to use these looser rules, and it should **use** that power so tanya and I can be treated as experts, passing on concerns that other people have passed on to us. This is what's called hearsay, and it is usually unacceptable in the High Court. So it would be a major breakthrough for us if it is allowed. It means we would call fewer witnesses, but still cover all their concerns.
- 3) And the judge agreed that could be part of the answer, and sent us all off to look at how it could happen. That really lifted a burden off our shoulders. We are very grateful for that idea from the human rights commission.
- 4) An added benefit is that solution is that our court case could take only five days instead of about 10.
- 5) So it would cost thousands of dollars less; and

- 6) it would mean they could book a court hearing many months sooner, because the longer the hearing, the harder it is to find a gap in the court's schedule with enough days in it.

We still have more work to do, but our burden is suddenly much lighter.

### The clinch

So that is another piece of the answer. It doesn't all depend on us. There is justice and help out there. And there are people who will listen to our concerns. And our load will be easier, and our burden lighter.

So what do you think? What do you do when you need to take it easy.

(Passes the microphone around)

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