

It Doesn't Have to Be That Hard

Matt. 11:25 At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; **26** yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. **27** All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Matt. 11:28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. **29** 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. **30** For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Today I want to tell you the story of Ignaz Semmelweiss. He was one of the great doctors of his day, working in the world's first obstetrics ward in Vienna General Hospital. And he had a problem: though it was a premiere hospital, with world-class physicians and nurses, the ward where he worked had mortality rate of 1 in 10 for the mothers! The risk was so high that women who were going to have a baby there would often be found wringing their hands or kneeling by their bedsides in prayer. The maternity ward had two sections—one in which midwives delivered babies, and one in which the doctors did. In the section with midwives, the mortality rate for mothers was 1 in 50, not great but significantly better than with the doctors. How could that be? Many of us have mysteries we face in our lives, mysteries in which the way we *think* things should be is not the way things actually *are*. In fact, some of us may be doing and thinking things we know are not how *we* would like to be, but we're not sure how to change. Fortunately for us, Jesus gives us the gift of breaking free from illusions.

We live in a "box" of our own making. When we were new parents, I was more tired than I have ever been in my life. I can only imagine how tired Cynthia must have been. Still there were times when Morgan would cry and I would know that she wasn't hungry, and I would know that a good husband and father would get up and take care of her so that Cynthia could get some sleep...but I confess that I would lie there for just a minute to see if Cynthia would get up. And while I lay there I would think things like,

- "Well, Cynthia needs less sleep than I do."
- "What if Morgan really is hungry? God didn't give me breasts to feed that child."
- "I have to work tomorrow, and if I don't get enough rest, I'll never be any good to anyone."
- "Cynthia's better at it anyway."
- "Aren't I entitled to a little rest?"

So many of my thoughts were me trying to justify myself, and they all share the same flaw—they were all about me. I was not thinking about Cynthia and how hard she works, or how tired she must be, how much I love and appreciate her, or about my daughter and how much she needs to know she's loved by her Dad. By failing to do the thing I knew was right—get up to see what Morgan needed—I started into self-deceptive, self-focused behavior that put me in

a box. And I did it to myself! Now, maybe we haven't all had *this* experience, but maybe we have all had times when we know we're wrong, and we tell ourselves we had a right to do that—it's perfectly understandable—and we blame everyone but ourselves for our failure. And so we make this box of self-deception and self-betrayal, and tell ourselves that we are happy to be in it. C.S. Lewis once said, "Disobedience to conscience makes conscience blind." Sure enough, if we ignore our consciences long enough, ignore God whispering into our lives about opportunities to show someone we care, pretty soon our consciences stop nudging us and then before long we can't even hear God whispering anymore. In the box, we can't be wrong—someone else must be. In the box, we know all the answers—everyone else is ignorant. In the box, we are plagued by fears that people will find out how inadequate, selfish or insecure we might be. And I say, "we," because to my great shame, I have done all of these things. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul talks about the box when he says, "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my life another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Spoiler Alert!

Jesus has three promises to help us out of our boxes this morning. **First, Jesus shares the load.** The darkest moments of our lives are often the ones in which we feel the most alone, trying to do the heavy lift of life by ourselves. It doesn't have to be that way. Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." In Jesus' time, people saw yokes all the time. A yoke was a very sturdy wooden device that served as a harness for a pair of oxen. That's how Jesus works too: instead of having to struggle to do better and bear all our burdens by ourselves, to "bootstrap" our way out of the box, Jesus comes alongside us and shares the burden. What a relief to know that we have help carrying our loads!

Second, Jesus will teach us how to live better. Do you ever say to yourself, "I have no idea what I'm doing here"? Yeah, me too! That's a great place for God to guide us. Like apprentices working with a master, we work together with Jesus. In Jesus' day, often an experienced ox was yoked with an inexperienced ox. Together they would plow the field and in the process of plowing together, the inexperienced ox would learn how to work together, how to respond to the Master's directions. The more we invite Jesus to walk with us, the more we follow his lead, the more we will learn how to live better, how to *be* better, how to go longer. We can begin to see our own lives in light of how Jesus lived. How incredible that Jesus can help us figure out life with us!

Third, Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden light. The Greek word, "easy," can mean "comfortable" or "well-fitting." With wooden yokes, it was very important to get a good fit, otherwise a corner or rough spot could put a blister or a gouge into an ox's neck and make it unfit for work until it healed. A carpenter would take the measurements and rough out the yoke. When it was ready, the farmer brought in the ox for a fitting. Every yoke was made to tailor fit the oxen that would use it. Jesus is the carpenter who tailor-fits the yoke of our relationship with Him. He will not expect more of us than we can give, and will be there to fill the gaps. We can give up all the mental gymnastics and self-justification we do to feel good about ourselves. We don't have to remember what half-truths we have told everyone. Instead we can have peace that we are doing what Jesus would want, what God would want, what (in the end) we want. Jesus' yoke is easy.

We can, indeed, be blind to the box we live in. Ignaz Semmelweiss was in one of those boxes. As one of the pre-eminent physicians in one of the best teaching hospitals in the world, Ignaz divided his time between the obstetrics ward and teaching medical students in their anatomy and physiology studies. His behavior turned out to be the problem. At the time, medical theory thought disease was caused by "humors" or "airs" coming from within the body. The idea that one could carry sickness from one person to another just didn't exist, but after eliminating every other cause, he realized he was the problem. He began requiring himself and all his staff to wash their hands before leaving the area with the cadavers. As a result, the mortality rate of mothers dropped for the whole obstetrics ward dropped to 1 in 100! To his credit, Semmelweiss was willing to look at his behavior with unflinching honesty. He knew the lives of his patients depended on it and when he realized that his own behavior had cost other people their lives he was devastated. Looking at ourselves with real honesty can be scary. We will see the darkness, selfishness and pettiness in our own souls, but we do not have to do that alone. Jesus is more than happy to go with us unhesitatingly, to look with us unflinchingly, and to help us unflinchingly. The biggest problem of life for most of us is that we make life way harder and more anxious, than it has to be. The whole meaning of grace is that with Christ in the yoke with us, with Christ's grace showing us the way, we can break free of the illusions we have made for ourselves, the illusions society has made for us, the illusions that are all around us. It just doesn't have to be that hard. Grace is a gift, and so is the ability to see how far we still have to go, and so is the chance to find the real and abundant life that comes. You see, the power of the Cross is not just that Jesus died to give us a chance and the strength to break free *from* our illusions, but He rose to free us *for* lives full of joy and hope with Him. Really...it can be that easy!