Many times during the past several months I have gone to bed completely exhausted. There have been times when I have been so tired, I can barely brush my teeth before climbing into bed. But it is very strange; more than a few nights I have found myself lying in bed in the dark, my body and my mind filled with tension and worries. Perhaps this has happened to you sometime in the past few months. What we need is rest. We need time to rest. We are carrying heavy burdens.

Some of the burdens we carry are burdens we have put upon ourselves. This is true for me. Sometimes it seems I refuse to be satisfied with what is. I could have been in the crowd the day Jesus said to them “To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’” No matter what the situation is, sometimes it seems life is not good enough for me. My greatest peril is that I refuse to be satisfied with the gift of today. So I heap more burdens and expectations upon myself and upon those I love. Some of the burdens we carry are burdens we have put upon ourselves.

Some of the burdens we carry have been placed on us by others. Jesus points out the way people delight in making accusations against others, regardless of the actual behavior of their opponents. Jesus says, For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’

When I read this verse, I think of a group of our members: Becky, Tom, Walley, Art, Cathy, David and Betsy. For more than four years this team has been working on the Open Doors project. The high quality of their work and their proposal has been recognized by state and national organizations. St. Paul’s Open Doors project was the feature story in the magazine of the National Fund for Sacred Places.

As a result of the work of the Open Doors team, St. Paul’s has received awards for grants totaling more than $800,000. These funds bring us more than halfway to our goal of increasing universal access, increasing our mission space and preserving and renovating our buildings. Thanks to the Open Doors team, we expect that new construction at St. Paul’s will begin in 12 months or less.

Becky and her team have contributed hundreds of hours of effort to the task, which is ultimately for the strengthening of St. Paul’s as a center for Christian ministry in downtown Syracuse. But, as I have learned to say, no good deed goes unpunished. I have been surprised to hear pointed criticism of the plan. Some of the criticism was that there was not enough emphasis on new mission projects. Some of the criticism was that the plan did not yield enough profit for the church. The very strange thing is that these two critiques were delivered by the same people. This has been a heavy burden for the Open Doors team to carry. Perhaps you have had the same experience of being criticized from both sides of an issue.

Jesus words are applicable here. Jesus observed that John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; and the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Jesus understands that the harsh personal criticism of others is often not an indication of failure on our part. Harsh, personal criticism is often an indication of the turmoil that is in the hearts of those making the accusations. And yet, the accusations and criticisms we receive are a heavy burden upon us. We are carrying heavy burdens, and we turn to God for strength. How will we receive this strength given to us by God’s grace?

Let’s begin by considering the enigmatic verse at the end of this paragraph. Jesus finishes these verses about the accusations and condemnations of the great crowd of people, saying Yet
wisdom is vindicated by her deeds. We have a slightly earlier version of this passage in the Gospel of Luke which reads, Wisdom is vindicated by all her children.

Here Matthew is drawing material from the earliest source of sayings of Jesus. In this source, Jesus refers back to a strand of Hebrew Scriptures, where divine wisdom is a distinct female character. These early followers of Christ made some of the first written versions of Jesus’ sayings, and understood and explained his divinity partly in his being a child of this female manifestation of God, Lady Wisdom.

Jesus said, Wisdom is vindicated by all her children. The earliest Christians understood this to mean that this feminine character of God is ultimately proven right by the actions of Christ and by the actions of all those who truly follow Christ. After all of the accusations and the judgments, those who truly follow Christ will see God’s wisdom vindicated in their deeds. So God’s strength will come to us in a variety of ways, and in ways we may not expect.

This is the point of the next paragraph, where Jesus says, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned and have revealed them to little children. We turn to God for strength, and God’s strength and guidance are given to us by unexpected messengers: even by little children.

This verse gives a powerful message, even taken at face value. I, for one, would never disagree with anyone who advocates for the gift of little children. But Jesus message is delivered in coded language and is broader and deeper than the literal meaning of the words.

When Jesus says, ‘I thank you Father…’ We might think Jesus is giving thanks for the success of his ministry or the fact that he has been able to heal so many people as he did back in chapters eight and nine. If you read all of chapters 10 and 11 you realize that Jesus has failed. Jesus has failed to convert the religious leaders of Galilee, the priests and the scribes and pharisees. Jesus is giving thanks that those who are understanding the true knowledge of God are not the religious authorities, but the little people, that is, the common people.

God’s strength will come to us in a variety of ways, and in ways we may not expect. We may be surprised to discover God’s strength more often coming to us through the common people instead of through religious leaders. This is what Jesus preaches, and this is my experience.

We are carrying heavy burdens, and we need God’s strength. So Jesus says, “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.”

What is the heavy burden you are carrying? Jesus knows. Jesus knows about the fear. Jesus knows about the despair and the sadness and the grief. Jesus knows about the unnecessary expectations we have placed on ourselves. Jesus knows about the accusations, the rejection, the condemnation you have received.

What is the rest you need? It is the rest Jesus offers us. This rest is not ease and lack of engagement. This rest is a relationship of trust and understanding. So we lay aside some part of ourselves and take Jesus’ yoke upon us. The yoke is a relationship that saves us. Jesus’ yoke is salvation. We are saved from those burdens and deadly judgments that will kill us, injuries inflicted on us by others and injuries we have inflicted on ourselves. 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.