

**Matthew 11:16-30**

<sup>16</sup>“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, <sup>17</sup>‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ <sup>18</sup>‘For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; <sup>19</sup>the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” <sup>25</sup>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; <sup>26</sup>yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

*Comforting God, by your Holy Spirit lift the burdens from our souls through the reading of your Word, that we may learn how easy it is to live in a loving relationship with you. Amen.*

I'd like to spend the sermon time this morning sharing our experience of being in Guatemala City with Safe Passage – Camino Seguro. We were a group of 11: Sally Dungan and her son Joe (who was born in Guatemala); Trina Jones and her granddaughter, Tegan; Kelly Cryan; Rebecca Schiller; Clara Ines Stone; Terry McCarthy; Heidi Root; Mariah Healy; and myself.

Safe Passage is a non-profit organization which provides support, nutrition, and schooling for children whose parents pick the Guatemala City garbage dump. These families are among the poorest of the poor.

Safe Passage was founded by Hanley Denning from Yarmouth, Maine, and who in 1997, traveled to Guatemala to learn Spanish.

While there she worked as a volunteer with at risk children in little villages in the outskirts of Antigua. Her one year commitment turned into two. Then in 1999 just before she planned to return to the States, a friend took her to see the Guatemala City garbage dump. What she saw changed her life: she saw mothers carrying babies in slings; little children picking through the garbage for food; people living in

cardboard boxes; all amidst a constant stream of moving garbage trucks. Hanley's heart was broken open.

Hanley contacted her parents and asked them to sell her car, her computer, and anything else she owned of value, and she emptied her savings account. In December of 1999, with roughly \$5000, Safe Passage opened with about 40 children, in a small vacant church.

It wasn't easy by any stretch. Hanley's efforts were resisted. Others had tried and failed. One morning Hanley arrived at the church site and found it wide open and empty; the doors, and all the books and supplies for the children had been stolen.

The culprits, described as angry men, were known to the locals but they wouldn't tell Hanley who they were. No doubt they feared for her safety if she, a woman, and a white woman at that, were to confront bad male behavior. Yet she finally wore them down and learned who had stolen the supplies. And yes, she would confront the thieves. 1 John 4:18 comes to mind: *“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.”*

The vision of the garbage dump had changed Hanley's life forever. She was transformed, and her transformed heart gave her great energy. She found the men and confronted them with the power and love of her heart. She told them that if they were trying to hurt her, they hadn't. Instead, they had hurt the children, their own children, their neighbor's children, their cousin's children. Then she told them that she was angry with them for acting out against innocent children; and walked away.

I would call it a miracle of God's grace; in a couple days the doors were put back on, and all the supplies were returned. It was a milestone; Hanley's work for the sake of the children was now recognized and accepted. Her love for the children and her service to the community were creating relationships of trust and support which only deepened the meaning of *“Safe Passage.”*

Tragically, Hanley was killed on January 18, 2007, when a bus with no brakes collided head-on with the car she was riding in. Her driver, a Guatemala native, was also killed. Hanley was 36.

Having now witnessed Safe Passage first hand, I can say with conviction that Hanley's heart and passion live on in the teachers and staff who continue the work she began. Since we've been back, Heidi and I have spoken often about the passion and energy that we witnessed in those who work and volunteer for Safe Passage. We are so impressed by them.

So how is this related to the yoke Jesus spoke of?  
What was Jesus' yoke? Which is to say, what was Jesus' burden?

Jesus had a heart and a passion for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. Jesus had a heart and a passion for all those that society ignored: the misfits, the sick, the crippled, the foreigner, the sinner. We might say that Jesus had a *burden* for the poor, the outcast, and the dispossessed.

To these Jesus poured out his compassion, which means he suffered with them, but not only that, he also moved to alleviate their suffering. Compassion is the willingness not only to suffer with others, but to become engaged in the elimination of that suffering. And it seems to me that if we are not willing to share in the suffering of another, we cannot really know how to ease that suffering?

Hanley entered into the lives of the poorest in slums of Guatemala City, she suffered with them and thus she found a way to make their lives better. The poor of Guatemala were Hanley's burden; she responded with a heart overflowing with love, and it gave her power to confront even angry men who wanted to see her fail.

The easy yoke that Jesus offers and invites us to take up, is the yoke of love. It is a burden because it breaks our heart to experience the suffering of others. And yet we can bear no greater power than the power of love expressed as compassion for those who suffer.

Our experience in Guatemala was an experience of heart, broken open to take up the burden of caring for the poor of this earth. The image of a yoke clearly suggests a physical burden. Indeed, having our hearts broken by the suffering we experience *is* a physical burden!

So how can Jesus say, "My yoke is easy?"

Simple because love-inspired compassion *is* empowering. True compassion is actually a source of great energy. I'm here to say that the energy of the Safe Passage teachers and staff was palpable; we could see it and feel it. Thus the yoke of compassion is an empowering yoke because it is an experience of the heart; it is transformative; it changes lives; it taps into the energy of love, which, by the way, is a direct line to the transforming love and power of God...which changes everything!

My daughter, Mariah volunteered with Safe Passage in 2007 shortly after Hanley was killed. But Safe Passage didn't die with Hanley. Safe Passage was never based on personality; it was built on heart. Mariah spent 5 weeks with Safe Passage because a friend was going there to volunteer; yet those 5 short weeks changed the course of her life.

Following a year of searching and saving, Mariah found V.E. Global (another non-profit working with at-risk children) and moved to Santiago, Chile. Her plan to stay a year stretched out to 6. Now Mariah is back with Safe Passage living her passion for working with at-risk children. That's the burden, or the yoke she has taken up. And it is clear to me that her burden empowers her to do great work. And her proud father says: Thanks be to God! Amen.

(Sharing from other participants)

Since graduating from Bowdoin College in 1992, Hanley worked tirelessly on behalf of at-risk children. The hard reality of life in the Guatemala City garbage dump was unlike anything she had ever experienced. She felt a calling to do something.

That same week she sold her computer. She sold her car. She emptied out her savings account. And she opened the doors of Safe Passage (*Camino Seguro*) in December 1999.

Hanley enrolled 46 of Guatemala City's poorest children in her new program. These children couldn't afford the books, school supplies, and enrollment fees required by the public school system.

Through Safe Passage, these children received tutoring, a healthy snack, and the care and attention they desperately needed. Another 70 children participated in a drop-in program when they weren't working in the dump.

Over the next eight years, Hanley's program grew. The educational reinforcement program found a new home in a safe and beautiful building further removed from the garbage dump, and an early childhood center and adult literacy program were established, thanks to the commitment and ambition of staff, community members, donors, volunteers, and international supporters.

On January 18, 2007, Hanley was killed in an automobile accident in Guatemala. Though her life was tragically cut short, her legacy lives on. Those she inspired continue to advance the mission she envisioned. Today, Safe Passage is stronger than ever.

**History:** Safe Passage was founded in 1999 by the late Hanley Denning, a teacher from Maine who traveled to Guatemala to learn Spanish. While she was there, the woman with whom she was lodging told her that she wanted her to see the Guatemala City Garbage Dump. After seeing this, Hanley called home and asked her parents to sell her car, computer, and other belongings so that she could start a program to help the people of the dump. With around \$5,000, she started a drop-in program in a church outside of the dump. Approximately 40 children showed up in the first week. People gave her a hard time at first, because others had tried to help them but given up. She persevered and about six months later gained people's confidence. Denning was killed on January 18, 2007, aged 36, when a bus with no brakes collided head-on with the car she was riding in. Her driver, a Guatemala native, was also killed. Two volunteers riding in the back seat of the car were injured. She was known by some as "El Angel del Basurero" or "The Angel of the Garbage Dump".<sup>[2]</sup> One of Safe Passage's most recent additions is the Early Childhood Education, program also known as the

Hanley Denning went to Guatemala in 1997 to study Spanish. At the time, she had been teaching in North Carolina after receiving her master's degree in education from Wheelock College. As soon as she arrived in Guatemala, Hanley began volunteering with children and adults living in small towns near Antigua.

Hanley loved Guatemala. A one-year commitment became two years, but still, she never imagined she would stay. Just as she prepared to return to the United States in 1999, her good friend Regina Palacios asked her a favor: to accompany her on a trip to the slums by the Guatemala City garbage dump.

That visit to the Guatemala City garbage dump changed Hanley's life, and, in turn, the lives of thousands in Guatemala and around the world.

Escuelita, which hosts children from ages two through six, enhancing their health and school readiness, and ensuring the well-being of these children while their parents work.<sup>[3]</sup>