

Message for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A (7/5/2020)
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

“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.”

If you’ve ever moved a heavy piece of furniture, you know that it’s a hassle.

Want to know who your real friends are? Ask them to help you carry a solid wood desk up a flight of stairs with a ninety-degree turn in it. It’s not just the physical exertion; it’s also the awkwardness, the pain in your hands, the sweat, the frustration when the going gets tough. Protips: plan your movements in advance; get a good grip; lift with your legs, not your back; watch your step, especially if you’re walking backward; pause if you need to rest; and above all, communicate. That last part is particularly important when your face is pressed up against a wood frame and you can’t see the person on the other end or the steps ahead of you.

Recently, I’ve thought of carrying a heavy load as a metaphor for my family’s life in a time of heightened stress. The best practices are similar: planning and organization, holding tight to one another, pacing ourselves, pausing for rest and renewal, and above all, communication. And, being part of a family is certainly hard work, with its fair share of heartaches and frustrations.

Every individual, every family, every community knows what a burden human life can be. The joys may be worth the pains, but the pains undoubtedly

take their toll. Especially when we're beset with distinct hardships or disadvantages or difficulties, life is a persistent struggle.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens," Jesus bids us in our Gospel from Matthew today, "and I will give you rest." If there's a more gracious invitation in all of holy scripture, I don't know what it is. But, notice that Jesus' promised rest doesn't involve laying down all burdens. It doesn't mean freedom from all responsibilities. "Take my yoke upon you," he proposes. That is, *trade your burden for mine*.

We know that the way of Jesus is no cake walk. He makes it abundantly clear that the bar for discipleship is high. Allegiance to the gospel involves the prospect of adversity and persecution, tension and even rupture in family relationships; it will require uncalculating generosity, unceasing forgiveness, even love for enemies. **The yoke of Jesus implies responsibility first and foremost to the reign of heaven on earth, and the stakes are high.**

How is it, then, that Jesus can claim that his yoke is "easy" and "light"? How is it that we'll find "rest for our souls"? I think the truth of his promise lies in the image of the yoke itself. A little familiarity with ancient agriculture will go a long way in this case. A yoke was a wooden brace worn by not one but two oxen to help them pull a load together. Joining two draft animals at the neck was a means of combining their strength while maintaining their unity of purpose.

According to this image, then, **discipleship doesn't mean to set down one lonely load in order to pick up another, but rather to accept the Lord's invitation to bear a load together.** To borrow the words of one commentator, "The yoke that Jesus offers is a shared burden, and it is light because Jesus is the one who carries it with you and for you."¹

This is a liberating word when we consider our commitment to our highest aspirations: justice, healing, abundant life for the whole world. The work can feel like a Sisyphean task, too great a challenge in the face of so many obstacles. It's easy to lose hope. But, the image of Jesus' yoke shifts our understanding of where the burden ultimately lies. **If I am yoked with Christ, then who do I imagine is pulling the lion's share of the weight?** Do I really believe that I'm more committed to the reign of heaven than God is? Is not the fulfillment of God's purposes on the heart of God much more than on mine?²

The assurance that Christ joins himself to us in the work of God's reign doesn't lower the stakes, but it puts the work into perspective. **If Christ bears the majority of the burden, then I can trust God to assign me my share of the load, and not more.** I can discern my calling according to my gifts, and decline to pick up burdens that are likely to overwhelm me. I can learn to say yes and no.

¹ Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Rest for Your Soul," <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5440>.

² Kris Rocke, Preaching Peace table, Tacoma, WA, 6/30/20.

What's more, **if I'm yoked with Christ, then I can trust him to set the trajectory.** "Take my yoke upon you," he says, "and learn from me." Rather than insist on my own way, in other words; rather than pull against the yoke and exhaust myself in the process, I can move in the direction that he leads and settle into his rhythm. Instead of setting my own agenda, I can ask: **Where is God already at work in the world, and where can I join in?**³

Dear church, the easy yoke, the burden that puts the soul at rest, is the purpose to which Jesus calls all of us. He never promises that the life of discipleship will be without trouble or strain. **The way of Jesus is the way of the cross. But, the way of the cross is also the way to life.** And, if he unites himself with us in our struggle, then he'll remain with us to the end, when God's reign will finally come on Earth as in heaven.

³ Jen Rude, Preaching Peace table, Tacoma, WA, 6/30/20.