

Sermon for Proper 9A
Sunday, July 2, 2023
“His Yoke is Easy”

Text: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Jesus said, “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.”

Last week we pondered over a lesson about being slaves to righteousness—slaves to God—and not to worldliness; in other words, what it’s like being a good disciple of Christ. That meant acting and living in such a way that might surprise or even offend the people closest to you, but it meant being radically different from behaving the way people were expected to behave at that time. Today, Jesus offers a different perspective on discipleship. He ultimately compares following him to being yoked where he will be able to lead his disciple in the paths of righteousness. But, to understand where Jesus is coming from, it is necessary to go back and look at the context from Matthew’s gospel. Jesus had just called the twelve disciples. He told them to go into the world and “proclaim the good news...Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons,” as we heard in last week’s gospel reading. Then he warned them that their task would not be easy. “See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves,” he said, because people wouldn’t understand the new way of life they would be leading as followers of Jesus. It must have sounded strange and was not the advice they were expecting from the messiah they had been longing for. Right after Jesus told gave them that advice, John the Baptist asked him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

Now, a lot was going on in their world at that time. Life was difficult for anyone living in Judea at the time, particularly the Jews. The Roman imperial government was in charge and the ruling elite secured wealth, status, and power at the expense of the poor and lowly by imposing heavy burdens on the people through stringent laws and exorbitant taxes. The religious leaders simply looked the other way. The religious leaders themselves imposed heavy burdens upon the faithful, burdens that were hard to bear, yet were themselves unwilling to lift a finger to move them. Those leaders who were supposed to be learned and well-versed in the law of the Torah taught a particular interpretation and practice that excluded the ritually unclean from meals, placed restrictions on the Sabbath that ignored human need, and were zealous about tithing mint, dill, and cumin, but neglected matters of the law, such as justice, mercy, and faith. John the Baptist had been imprisoned by King Herod. John had been teaching and preaching that Jesus was the Messiah and he had even baptized him, when he heard the voice of God declaring that Jesus, indeed, *was* the Messiah, but when he heard about

Jesus's unusual call to action, he wasn't so sure. The corrupt Romans were still in power, the self-serving, self-righteous Jewish religious leaders were still in power, and the great judgement that John envisioned had not yet materialized. He was losing patience. So, John sent his disciples to Jesus with a question: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"

Jesus's response to John's question was to tell John's messengers that the blind were receiving their sight, the lame were walking, the lepers were being cleansed, the deaf now hear, the dead are being raised, and the poor are having the good news brought to them. Jesus was reassuring them that the kingdom of God was near, but that was little consolation for an oppressed people. Jesus was trying to teach them that there was a better way to live, though they continued to live under the hard burden of Roman civil authorities and Jewish religious authorities, but through him the burdens of oppression and corruption could feel lighter. You know what a yoke is? A yoke is a wooden or metal device placed around the neck of cows so that they can be more easily controlled; a yoke keeps the cows in line. Jesus used that familiar image to explain that the yoke of faithfulness to God was easier to handle than the yoke imposed by those in power. Through it one could be a slave to God and not to the world, and one's life would be more livable.

Today's world presents its own challenges, not unlike that of Jews living in 1st Century Judea. The threats of institutional injustice, denial of human and civil rights, police brutality, and violence in our streets often make it seem like we still live in the days of the Roman Empire. Even in our own lives, we might be facing personal hardships, serious difficulties in our homes and families, health issues that cause us worry, strains in our relationships with family, friends, or colleagues. We are burdened by all kinds of yokes that entrap us and keep us bound up. But Jesus offers a different kind of yoke: a yoke that lightens the load and makes our suffering more bearable. See, he didn't say that the problems of this world would suddenly disappear when we walk in the paths of righteousness. Simply removing the things from our past that disturb us won't make our past go away; we have to work at creating a new and better world. Being a faithful disciple won't get rid of life's hardships, but, Jesus said that putting on the yoke of God will lighten the load. Putting on the yoke of God will ease the burden. Being yoked to God through him will bring unimaginable freedom, and that mountain that seems too big to climb will suddenly be surmountable.

But there's something else about the yoke of Christian discipleship: we are yoked to each other as a community, here for one another. None of us has to endure life's journey all alone; we can share our joys and struggles with one another and support each other. Having others to share the load with makes it easier to bear; life is more manageable when there's someone in our lives who can celebrate our joys with us and comfort us in times of sorrow.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” God wants us to take time to rest, to refresh our bodies and reinvigorate our minds. The words of Jesus to his disciples, including ourselves, is that he knows a way of living that makes our human life on earth more endurable. “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.” Amen.

Resource

Elizabeth Johnson, “Commentary on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30,” *The Working Preacher*, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=970.