

## “Take My Yoke”

Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
July 6, 2014 Ordinary 14A

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Matthew 11:16-20, 25-30

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.”

What kind of burdens do you carry in life? Maybe you have too much responsibility, too many decisions to make, too many things to take care of. Or maybe you are burdened by scarcity; there’s not enough money, you don’t have enough health or strength, not enough emotional resources to call on in times of need. Or maybe you carry the burden of past mistakes or missed opportunities. Or the burden of feeling different from others and not being able to find your place in the world. What kind of burden do you carry in life?

In the passage Michael read from Matthew this morning, Jesus was not just talking about the ordinary burdens of life.\* He was also speaking to people on a religious quest, people who were seeking God but were exhausted by the heavy burden of religious requirements and laws. There were at least 600 rules and regulations in the Jewish tradition that people of faith were supposed to follow. And keeping them could be a hardship for ordinary people, who had other responsibilities to deal with as well.

The religious leaders were considered wise and intelligent at that time, and they interpreted these laws strictly and literally. They taught that if you didn’t do this, and this, and that, exactly the right way, and stay away from this, and this, and that, all the time, then you were not acceptable to God. But Jesus believed it was a burden to have to observe every bit of the law literally. Jesus said the Pharisees and teachers of the law “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulder of others...” (Matt. 23:4), all the while neglecting the basic spirit of the law which is justice, mercy, faithfulness and love. For Jesus, religion was not supposed to make life harder and more complicated. And so he said, “Come to me.” I will show you another way.

Chapter 11 of Matthew begins with John the Baptist in prison, wondering whether Jesus was the one they had been waiting for. So John sent his disciples to Jesus to ask him. And Jesus answered by inviting John to judge by what he had seen and heard Jesus do, that is, heal the blind, the lame, lepers and the deaf, raise the dead, and bring good news to the poor. These are all things the prophet Isaiah prophesied about the coming Kingdom of God.

After John’s disciples left, Jesus told the crowds that John the Baptist was greater than anyone who had ever lived, even the prophets. He was the one sent by God to prepare for the Messiah. But many people weren’t listening or responding to John or to Jesus. So Jesus compared them to children calling to each other to play. We played the flute and you wouldn’t dance. We sang funeral songs, and you wouldn’t mourn. John prepared for God’s Kingdom by fasting and praying, and the people said he had a demon. Jesus ate and drank and proclaimed God’s Kingdom here now, and the people said he was a drunk. They didn’t like John and they didn’t like Jesus. They were against

everything new. All they wanted was to hold to and enforce their own oppressive rules and regulations.

Jesus offered a different way. He said, “Come to *me* ... and I will give you rest. Take *my* yoke upon you and learn from me...” A yoke is a big wooden crossbar that goes over the shoulders and around the necks of work animals so they can plow a field or pull a heavy load together. A yoke might also be laid on a prisoner of war or a slave. It was a well-known symbol of oppression and carrying heavy burdens. How could a yoke be good news to someone who was already tired and over-burdened? Wouldn't it just symbolize more work, more heavy loads to carry?

But Jesus said, “*My* yoke is easy.” Now by “easy,” Jesus did not mean living a life of ease, lounging around all day and feeling lazy. To follow Jesus is a challenge to engage with God, with other people, and with life. But when we follow Jesus, we are not supposed to feel drained or exhausted. Instead, following Jesus makes us more alive, rested, and centered. We may be working just as hard as before, or harder, but we have a sense of power and freedom.

It's like having a good pair of shoes. We all have to walk. But if we walk a distance barefoot or in shoes that don't fit, it can be painful and wear us down. But if we have a good pair of shoes that fit well, they make walking easier. Likewise, a yoke that fits makes the burdens of life easier to carry.

Jesus said, “Come to me... and I will give you rest.” Notice Jesus did NOT say, “Come to church, or come to the religion called Christianity, or come to this new teaching, interpretation, or list of principles to follow.” He said, “Come to ME.” It's a call to relationship, a relationship with Jesus, and a relationship with the community of people built around him.

People often confuse the church with Jesus. And if you do that, you miss the point of coming to church. The point of a church is to bring people together, not to go to meetings or to have fun and fellowship, but to strengthen our relationship with Jesus, and work together to do God's will in the world. The church is a community of people. But it's also an institution, and as such, it's not a goal in and of itself.

Last Sunday afternoon six people from our church attended the closing ceremony for Holy Spirit Lutheran Church here in town. The church had a ministry in this town for the last 88 years, but the members had the good sense to realize they no longer had enough people to maintain the building and pay the pastor's salary. The building will probably be knocked down, the property redeveloped, and the people will hopefully move on to other congregations. It was a sad day, but also an inspiring reminder that the church is not a building, and it's larger than any one institution. The place was packed, not only with members and former members, but also pastors and members from other Lutheran churches and congregations in town – all there witnessing to God's spirit alive on this earth through the church universal. One particular church may play an important role in our lives, but it is never a substitute for God or for Jesus. Jesus said, “Come to ME.”

Now you may have noticed that the scripture reading for today skipped a whole section of Matthew. It jumped from verse 19 to verse 25. What did we miss? I asked Michael to read verse 20 so you'd get a idea of what's in between the two sections we read. Verse 20 says, “Then Jesus began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.” The rest of the verses are Jesus

declaring judgment on whole cities for their refusal to repent. They rejected Jesus' words and deeds, and would not look at themselves critically, or consider there was any need to change.

I mention these verses on July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend to remind us that it's not only our individual response to Jesus that counts, but also our collective response. No institution or town or government is ever so special that they don't need to repent. So as we celebrate the birth of this great country, we must never lose our ability to be critical of ourselves. How do our towns and states and our country as a whole measure up?

Jesus healed the blind, and lame. Do we care about healing, not just for the privileged or successful, but for all God's children? Jesus welcomed strangers and preached good news to the poor. Do we give the poor the same kind of care and attention? How do we treat strangers and foreigners?

Just last week protesters in the small city of Murrieta, California, turned away three busloads of immigrant mothers and children who were being brought for processing at a Border Patrol station there. Some said they were concerned that these immigrants were bringing diseases into their community and would over-run their schools. Others were afraid of gangs, and how much an influx of immigrants might cost them. The protesters carried American flags and signs saying, "return to sender." They screamed "go home" and chanted "USA!"\*\* But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me... for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." (Matt. 19:14).

What would it mean for a town to repent? And what is our role as individuals and as a church in helping people see where we need to change, and welcome the new things God may be doing in our midst?

Jesus calls all people, even whole towns and countries to repent, to turn from our hard-hearted and controlling ways and be open to God's spirit. And when we are honest about who we are and where we have fallen short, Jesus does not condemn. He receives us as we are – weary, worn and sad. He offers us a resting place, forgiveness and new life. He surrounds us with love, and offers us his yoke, an opportunity to learn from him the way to life. That way is not a list of "dos" and "don'ts." Jesus calls us to walk with him, and open our hearts to God and to our neighbors in love. May we take his yoke and learn from him, for it is Jesus that brings life. Amen.

\* credit to the Rev. James Liggett, "The Yoke That Fits," at <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2014/06/10/4-pentecost-proper-9-a-2014/-comments>.

\*\* "The Town Where Immigrants Hit a Human Wall," by Jennifer Medina, The New York Times, Friday, July 4, 2014. Page A1.