

“Take My Yoke Upon You” Matt. 11:28-30

9/27/20

An elderly woman walked into a small country church. A friendly usher greeted her at the door and asked her where she wanted to sit.

“The front row, please,” she answered.

“I wouldn’t advise that,” replied the usher. “The pastor is really boring.”

“Do you know who I am?” asked the woman.

“No,” said the usher.

“I am the pastor’s mother,” stated the woman indignantly.

“Do you know who I am?” asked the usher.

“No,” she said.

“Good,” he replied, and walked away!

My wife, Bonnie, told me I needed to begin this sermon with a funny story. Please tell her if you think I succeeded. You can tell me if you think the sermon is boring!

In many World Religion classes, students are taught that the major religions are basically the same. But listen to this provocative quote from author, Dane Ortlund, “The ancient Greeks told us to be moderate by

knowing our inclinations... Buddhism tells us to be disillusioned by annihilating our consciousness. Hinduism tells us to be absorbed by merging our souls. Islam tells us to be submissive by subjecting our wills... Only the (Christian) gospel tells us to be free by acknowledging our failure. Christianity is the unreligion because it is the one faith whose founder tells us to bring not our doing, but our need.”

Jesus’ invitation in Matt. 11 is based on that understanding of Christian faith- that our relationship with God is not about improving yourself until you’re ready to come to God. Instead, it’s about coming to Jesus as you are and receiving his grace. Jesus said, ²⁸“*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*” ²⁹*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.* ³⁰*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*” (Matt. 11:28-30) As we’ve studied this passage the last two Sundays, we examined the fact that Jesus’ invitation is available to all people. Then we looked at the different kinds of burdens that Jesus invites us to bring to him. This morning, we’ll look at the yoke that Jesus invites us to put on.

At first, this may seem like a contradiction! Jesus invites us to lay down our heavy burdens and find rest. Now he wants us to put on a yoke? How is that restful? I think the answer is found in verse 30. There, he

specifies that we'll find rest *for our souls*. The kind of burdens that most of us carry- like trying to make ourselves right with God on our own power, trying to be perfect, trying to handle life's challenges on our own- those kinds of burdens are toxic to our souls. They are toxic because they are impossible loads to carry, and we inevitably fail when we try to carry them. Jesus invites us to bring those harmful burdens to him and lay them down.

But no one gets through life without carrying some kind of burdens. In the words of the Bob Dylan song, "You're gonna have to serve somebody. It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna have to serve somebody." Jesus invites us to put down our impossible, toxic loads and put on his easy yoke instead.

Actually, there is another better translation for the word "easy." The other translation is "well-fitted." And that probably makes more sense. Yokes were placed on pairs of animals, usually oxen, so they could pull a load. The process of fitting a yoke to the ox was an exacting one. First, a rough yoke would be cut out of wood that would be tried on the animal. Then it would be shaped and re-shaped until it fit the particular animal exactly. If it were poorly fitted, the animal would develop sores on its skin. Then it couldn't work until those sores were healed. So, a properly-fitted yoke was crucial to the ability of the animal to pull its load. Jesus would

have had first-hand knowledge of this process, due to his work as a carpenter.

If we're putting on Jesus' yoke, he must have work for us to do. He does! It's God's work of bringing the values and practices of his kingdom here to earth. As we pray in the Lord's Prayer. "*Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*" But Jesus promises that whatever work he has for us to do will be well-suited to our capabilities- to our gifts & talents, to our temperament, to our capacities.

What kind of work does Jesus have for us? Broadly, it involves sharing the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ with everyone. That can be done on an individual one-on-one level, or through outreach ministries, or through social media. God's work for us also involves working for justice for all people.

Whether you like the "Black Lives Matter" slogan or not, the fact remains that African-Americans have not been treated fairly in this country since they were forced to come to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. While a great deal of progress has been made, statistics show that our justice system treats them more harshly than white people accused of the exact same crimes. They are treated with suspicion in our retail businesses. They have more trouble moving up the ladder in our corporations. They are much more likely to live in poverty, and less likely to have health care

coverage. And they still experience discrimination in regard to housing. There is work to be done to assure that all people are treated fairly in our country. And that is God's work, shared by us.

But real need doesn't stop at our borders. What about refugees facing persecution back home who are pleading for asylum so they can live peacefully in this country? Did you know that the number of Christians granted asylum in the US because they are experiencing religious persecution has been cut back so that it's only 10% of what it was just a few years ago? God cares about those who are oppressed. Wealthy nations have a biblical responsibility to offer them help when we can. We can do more and we should. Much more.

Jesus' work in the world also involves creating jobs so people can support themselves, figuring the best way to address the pandemic and making sure truthful information about preventing the disease prevails. And it involves providing spiritual support to all kinds of people in all kinds of ways, for example- to those who are ill or grieving. Jesus invites us to take on his yoke of making a significant difference in our world.

Paul Knight, a pastor in North Dakota, visited Ethiopia to view Christian mission work there and to meet a little girl his family had been sponsoring through Compassion International. He brought gifts to the girl and her mother who lived in a one-room home that also functions as the

local bar. During his visit, the place began filling with rowdy men from the village. His guide took him by the arm and said, "We have to go. Now!" Paul looked over at the 10 year-old girl they sponsored and begged for more time with her. "No!" said the guide. "It's not safe for you here!"

"But what about our girl?" Paul asked. "Will she be safe?"

"This is her home," replied the guide.

"But will she be safe?"

"Maybe not. But this is her home."

"What do you mean, that she will maybe not be safe?"

"Mostly likely, everything you think it means," said the guide.

"What can she do?" pleaded Paul.

The guide responded, "We teach the girls to do this: Scream and run to the church when they are afraid. When you get to the church, you will find love and safety. The church will shelter you. So when they feel threatened or vulnerable, they scream and run to the church."

That's also part of the yoke that Jesus calls the church to put on. To protect those who are weak and vulnerable. Now, that will be inconvenient. It will be costly. It will often be hard to know exactly what to do. Others may not understand or approve. But Jesus promises that the work he

gives us will be a good fit for the abilities and passions we have been given by God. The question is: Will you take on the yoke that Jesus offers you?

One more thing. When animals are yoked, they are yoked to another animal; They don't work by themselves. So, when we put on Jesus' yoke, with whom are we yoked? The passage doesn't say. Some people think that it is Jesus himself who works alongside us. I think that's a good possibility. Another possibility is that we are yoked together with other Christians, who share the load with us. Such as the elders in our congregation who work with one another and with other church members to accomplish Jesus' work in this place. I think both answers are possible, but the important point is that we don't shoulder this load by ourselves. And that's good news!

Jesus said, ²⁹*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.* ³⁰*For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*"