

7.5.26 Sermon on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

We are getting ready to go to the beach next week, and if you have ever traveled with children, you know you what it is like trying to pack a car with everything you need for a trip. It seems like there is an endless list of things you need, especially if you are traveling with infants or toddlers. Thankfully, we are past the days of having to fit pack'n'plays and strollers in our car, but somehow, still it ends up packed to the gills. But I have to confess, even before children, I was not a light packer. I'd always throw in an extra pair of shoes – or two – or maybe one more pair just in case. And then a couple of books I'll never actually have time to read, and more snacks than any single person could need. An extra outfit becomes three extra outfits, and before I'd know it, I couldn't actually zip my suitcase. This became especially challenging in international travel. I can remember one time when I was traveling (for a long period of time during a summer term in London) and my bag was so heavy and overpacked that I ended up having to pay a baggage fee because it was so over the weight limit. I can remember thinking to myself in that moment, did I really need all of these things? I could have lightened my load – I still would have been going on the same trip. The destination was the same. I would have just simply stopped carrying things I never needed to bring in the first place. Will I take my own advice this coming week when packing for the beach? That is still to be determined.

But I wonder if that's a little bit like what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel lesson – no longer carrying things that we never needed to hold on to in the first place. We often hear Jesus say, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" as if he is promising that following him will make life easy. But we know that is not what he means, because Jesus is on his way to the cross, and the disciples will face persecution. The early church will suffer. Following Jesus does not make life easy. On Sunday mornings as we read the Scripture, we repeatedly see that following Jesus sometimes means choosing compassion over convenience, justice over silence, forgiveness over revenge, and truth over popularity – costly choices.

So what does Jesus actually mean when he says "my yoke is easy and my burden is light?" To answer that, first we have to understand what a yoke meant to the people who first heard these words. In its most basic definition, a yoke was a wooden beam placed across the shoulder of two oxen so they could pull a plow together. Often when we hear the word "yoke" we think of a burden or oppression. But for Jesus' listeners, a yoke wasn't simply a burden – it was something that gave direction and enabled work that brought about fruitfulness. It was something that allowed the animals to pull together instead of alone.

But there was another meaning as well. "Yoke" had become a common symbol for a rabbi's teaching. Rabbis spoke about taking upon oneself the "yoke of the Torah" or the "yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven." Every rabbi had a particular understanding of what faithful living looked like, and to become that rabbi's student, or disciple, was to take on that rabbi's yoke – to learn from them, imitate them, and shape their lives around their rabbi's teaching.

So when Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me," he is speaking as a rabbi inviting disciples. He isn't saying, "Come to me and you'll never have to worry again." He's saying, "Learn my way. Let my understanding of God and the world become your understanding. Let my way of living become your way of living."

Jesus is not offering a trouble-free life, or a yoke-free life. He is offering an exchanging of yokes. Each of us is already wearing a yoke of some sort. We all organize our lives around something. We all give our allegiance to something. We all have some sort of vision about what makes life meaningful and worthwhile.

Some of us are yoked to success, believing our worth depends on what we accomplish. Some of us are yoked to wealth, convinced that a little more will finally be enough. Some of us are yoked to perfectionism, always feeling we have to prove ourselves. Others of us are yoked to fear, resentment, or the opinions of other people. Others of us are yoked to political ideologies or nationalism, believing our ultimate hope lies in the success of a nation rather than in the kingdom of God. Every single one of these yokes promises some sort of freedom, of flourishing. But eventually, every one of those yokes becomes exhausting – because the promise will ultimately fall short.

But Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Matthew gives us an important clue about what these burdens are, because just a little later, Jesus criticizes the religious leaders, saying that they “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others.” The burden that Jesus is confronting is religion that has forgotten grace. It is the exhausting burden of believing that everything depends on us. It’s the burden that makes us ask, “have I done enough? Am I faithful enough? Have I followed enough rules? Will God still love me if I fail?”

Many people, and perhaps many of us, have spent years carrying that kind of burden. Some of us may have been taught that Christianity is mostly about fear – fear of getting it wrong, fear of not measuring up, fear of divine punishment. Many LGBTQ Christians have carried the crushing burden of being told they are somehow incompatible with God’s love. Others have borne the burden of shame, or guilt, or the constant need to prove themselves.

It can be a little bit like arriving at the baggage counter with an over-stuffed suitcase, full of things we never needed to carry. But Jesus opens that suitcase and begins removing things, saying, “You don’t need this. You don’t need that. You were never meant to carry these. Here. Take my yoke instead.”

Here’s another interesting detail about the text – when Jesus says “My yoke is easy,” the word there, *chrestos*, which does not mean effortless or without trouble. Instead, it carries the connotation of “well-fitting” or “good.” Kind of like a pair of shoes that are perfectly tailored to your feet – the kind where you don’t even notice you are wearing them because they are so comfortable. The road you are walking may still be long, and the hills steep, but now you’re walking in shoes that your feet were made to walk in.

I think that is what Jesus means here. His way isn’t easier because it asks less of us, but his way is easier because it is the life we were created for. Forgiveness is difficult, but bitterness is heavier. Generosity costs us something, but greed will never let us rest. Compassion asks a lot of us, but hatred crushes our souls. And while love can break our hearts, selfishness will ultimately imprison them. The yoke of Christ fits because it is the life God created us to live.

But there is one more thing that we need to notice here. It is tempting to hear Jesus’ invitation as though it were just about me and Jesus – about my peace, my comfort, my relationship with God. But a yoke is almost always made for two – it joined two animals together so they could do the work side-by-side. Jesus isn’t inviting us into private, individualistic spirituality. He is yoking us to himself, but also to a

community that learns to carry life together. In Galatians 6, Paul writes, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” Jesus frees us from the burdens that crush us so we are able to carry the burdens that belong to all of us. We are freed from shame so we can offer grace, and freed from fear so we can love with courage. We are freed from the need to prove ourselves to each other so we can work together to serve our neighbors.

As I reflected on this passage this week, I couldn’t help but think about Dietrich Bonhoeffer (which does happen regularly since he remains one of the most influential theologians on my life.) Bonhoeffer knew something about costly discipleship. He refused to give his allegiance to Hitler, and tirelessly worked to resist the Third Reich. He was imprisoned and eventually executed just a few weeks before the end of World War II. No one can accuse Bonhoeffer of believing that following Jesus was easy.

And yet, while he sat in prison awaiting death, he wrote a poem called “Stations on the Way to Freedom.” Freedom, from a prison cell. How could he possibly write about freedom? It was because Bonhoeffer had discovered what Jesus was teaching all along. Freedom was not about not bearing a yoke. It was about belonging to Christ. Bonhoeffer wrote, “Only those who obey believe, and only those who believe obey.” For Bonhoeffer, obedience to Christ was actually the path to freedom. Near the end of the poem, Bonhoeffer wrote, “Freedom, long have we sought you in discipline, action, and suffering. Dying, we now behold in the face of God your own face.” Bonhoeffer discovered that the burden of following Christ, even into prison, was lighter than the burden of surrendering to fear or to evil. The yoke of Christ was easier than the yoke of compromise with Hitler and the Third Reich.

This is the paradox at the heart of the Gospel. The world defines freedom in a variety of ways – some that say freedom means answering to no one, or that freedom means protecting yourself, or that freedom comes from having power. But Jesus shows us that freedom is found in belonging to the one who made us, that when we lose our life we will find it. Freedom is found in humility and love of the other. This is the yoke that Jesus invites us to take.

The invitation of Jesus is not, “Come to me, and you will never carry anything difficult again.” The invitation is, “Come to me, and stop carrying what is destroying you.” Let us lay down the burden of proving our worth and lay down the burden of earning God’s love. Let us lay down the burden of fear, resentment, and the illusion that everything depends on us. Then let us take up something different. Let us take up the yoke of mercy, compassion and forgiveness. Let us take up the yoke of seeking justice and the yoke of loving God and loving our neighbor.

That yoke may still cost us. It may lead us to places we never expected to go. But it is the only yoke that leads to life, because it is carried with the one who first carried the cross for us. In the end, that is the promise Jesus makes – not that the road will be easy, but that we will never walk it alone. And somehow, in walking beside Christ, we discover true freedom. Thanks be to God. Amen.