

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL

July 6, 2014

"An Easier Yoke"

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Text—Matthew 11: 16-30

"Come unto me, all ye that labor. Come unto me, ye that are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me. For I am meek and lowly of heart. And ye shall find rest unto your soul."

George Frederick Handel, of course. From his beloved oratorio, *“The Messiah.”* This is one verse of an aria sung by soprano and alto that begins with the verse, *“he shall feed his flocks like a shepherd”* —

How often we have heard these words and been comforted. To be given rest! What an invitation it is! An amazing invitation, actually — because it immediately follows Jesus’ rather stern rebuke to Israel. To those who had witnessed his deeds and heard his teachings but had not repented. To those who were critical and found fault with everything. To those who did not have ears to hear.

The text of the aria is missing one phrase, though. It is the last verse of our reading today: *“For his yoke is easy and his burden is light.”* If you can indulge me in following this musical setting a bit farther, anyone who has sung *“The Messiah”* whether in high school, in a professional chorus, or in a *“do it yourself”* version, knows that what comes next is a choral piece that finishes off that text. It is a marked change from the sweet and gentle, dance-like rhythm to one of the most challenging choruses of the oratorio in tempo, pace, and the counterpoint of voices. It made me wonder if Handel was exhibiting a sense of humor. *“His yoke is easy. His burden is light”* sung to music that is anything but easy!

And, from what we’ve read and heard — both this morning and on other mornings — following Jesus is anything but easy. Isn’t it? Stories from the Hebrew scriptures these past two weeks, Abraham’s obedience to God, leaving his homeland for the unknown, his difficulties with Sarah and Hagar, the test of sacrificing his son, were not easy. The New Testament: the disciples — learning what they will need to do to carry on Jesus’ message to the ends of the earth — not easy.

Now, we reach a crossroad in Jesus’ ministry. He has just completed his discourse to the disciples about how they are to carry on. He has been around a while, now, teaching, healing, performing miracles. And many have followed him. But detractors have also emerged. Perhaps having learned what is involved, they are not up to it. Perhaps the lives they lead are not perfect, but they are familiar. Jesus likens them to children who refuse to join in each other’s games. Dissatisfied, whining, they are unable to see what has been revealed to them.

Neither John the Baptist nor Jesus meet whatever visions they hold for messengers from God or for a Messiah. John is too austere — he walks around like a crazy man in the desert dressed in camel’s hair and fasts from food and drink and calls them to repent. Jesus, on the other hand, is a party animal — eating and drinking with all manner of inappropriate people. The people mock and sneer: John is possessed by a demon, they say. Jesus is a glutton and a drunkard. Why would anyone want to follow people like that? They are easy to dismiss.

Here is a Jesus we are not so accustomed to seeing. A prophet. One who has harsh words for them: Woe to those who do not repent. Woe to Chorazin and Bethsaida. Woe, even to his hometown, Capernaum. Here, Jesus turns away from those imprisoned by their religious Law those going through the motions, focusing on the letter of the law instead of its spirit so they cannot be open to the message that John and Jesus brought. These are the ones Jesus calls in his prayer "the wise and intelligent," those who do not have ears to hear. Here, he begins to form a new community of the "infants," the humble and the outcast who are willing to learn from him. In this prayer, the invitation becomes one to *all*. Not just those in the Jewish community but to all who can break the chains of their bondage to what was and what has been and form a new community and enjoy the freedom of Jesus' way. And, it is to these that he gives the amazing invitation:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."
"Take my yoke upon you and learn of me."
"My yoke is easy. My burden is light."

From the same one who said, just a few chapters ago, "The gate is narrow. The road is hard." How can this be? How can both be true? And what do yokes and burdens have to do with rest?

I was born and raised in a farming community, so I know what a yoke is. Not because horses and oxen were still being used to pull farm implements—we did have tractors in my youth, along with self-propelled combines. I recognize yokes because there was one relic still in use. It was crotchety old Bill Copeland's team of horses that pulled wagon he used to haul all of the town's trash. These were work horses—sturdy with thick legs like Clydesdales, except they were more flea-bitten. The wagon wasn't shiny and grand like the Budweiser coach, either. It rumbled along on iron-spoked wheels and was made of weather-beaten boards that looked like barn siding.

It took both horses to pull the heavy wagon. Neither one could have done it alone. Or if they trotted off in different directions. And that's the thing about yokes. They do restrict, but they do much more! They make it possible to bear the burden. They lighten the load.

The chains that bind us today are not the same as in Jesus' day. We enjoy freedoms that the people of Jesus' and Matthew's time could not even imagine. We are not subject to foreign rule. We can live our lives pretty much as we wish and practice our faith without fear of persecution. Nevertheless, we *are* bound. Some of our most cherished freedoms are constantly at risk. Because someone else's freedoms diminish ours. Ours diminish another's. Sometimes it is the few who are in power over the many who are vulnerable. The rich over the poor. One religion or belief over another.

"Learn from me."

It is in the example Jesus gives us through his own ministry that we can begin to discern what we are called to do and be. To exchange the yoke of law and judgment for the yoke of love and right relation. In our Gospel stories, Jesus is the most indignant when dealing with the self-righteous religious leaders who flaunted their piety.

Jesus told us how, didn't he? He told us what was most important to love God with all our hearts, minds, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourself. Jesus said his yoke is easy. But it is not without a cost. No. It is clearly a call to discipleship. A call to give up our pride, our pretentiousness, and our illusions of self-sufficiency. A call to admit our limitations and needs and to put on the yoke of humility and compassion. To share the yoke and lighten the load.

There are chains that bind and imprison. There are yokes that bind and free us. The choice is ours. There are no promises here of exemptions from toil or struggle. Or of endless leisure and lives of ease. We are not guaranteed lives without pain and suffering. But by taking the risk of choosing life, receiving the invitation that Jesus offers, and dedicating ourselves to God's service, we find that we take on a yoke that binds us together and to God. We are never alone. While wearing the yoke, we cannot go off on our own, but we can be part of a team, pulling in the same direction. What may seem impossible alone becomes possible when there is another to help us. When someone else walks with us through our struggles and takes part of the load.

Hear these words one more time--from an expanded translation and midrash that uses the King James and Peshitta versions of this passage:

KJV: Come unto me, all ye that labour (A) and are heavy laden (B), and I will give you rest.(C)

Come in your frenzied weariness,
your movement without end,
your action without purpose,
not caring in your fatigue whether you live or die.(A)

Come enmeshed by what you carry,
the cargo taken on by your soul,
the burdens you thought you desired,
which have constantly swollen and now exhaust you. (B)

Come like lovers to your first tryst:
I will give you peace and renewal after constant stress:
Your pendulum can pause
between here and there, between being and not-being.(C)

KJV: Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me;(A) for I am meek and lowly in heart:(B) and ye shall find rest unto your souls.(C)

Why not absorb yourself in my work: here's newly plowed earth ready for a crop of guidance and illumination.
Jump into the whirlpool
of wisdom,
the impassioned spiral of understanding your self.(A)

Here's the peace you're looking for:
the softening of the heart's rigid feelings and thoughts.(B)

In my way, you will find a refuge of renewable energy
within the struggle and grasping of your subconscious soul.

In my way, when you wrestle for the knowledge of your Self,
the self you find finds rest.(C)

Amen.