

Jesus's Yoke

July 5, 2020

UMCG

On this 4th of July weekend, as we continue to celebrate our nation's independence from colonial rule, I ask, "How is it with your soul?" Now that's a question John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, often asked his colleagues and parishioners. "How is it with your soul?" And that's a question our Bishop asks us pastors every Clergy Session prior to Annual Conference. Given the unique circumstances we find ourselves in with the Corona virus, this was the first time, ever, that our Clergy Session met via ZOOM this past Monday. "How is it with your soul?" What a pertinent question for today!

This past week, on the website "Dear Working Preacher," Rev. Dr. Kathryn Schifferdecker, a Prof. at Lutheran Seminary in Minnesota, begins her blog to us preachers with the sincere question, "How are you? No...really...How are you? How is it with your heart, your spirit?" (1) Drawing on her own pastoral experience, she acknowledges both the blessings...and the burdens of pastoral ministry. She goes on to say: "If you feel like you're carrying the weight of the world in your hands or on your shoulders, listen to this invitation from Jesus."

"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." (Matthew 11:28-30)

I believe all of us need to hear Jesus's invitation, once again, during these trying days. We live in disturbing times. Headlines speak of surging Covid-19 across much of our nation and the world. We've been reminded again and again of our country's structural racism. Videos of police violence against black and brown persons are all too common. Millions of Americans are out of work amidst widespread uncertainty about the coming months. All this is exacerbated by deep political divides with a contentious, vitally important presidential election looming close ahead. So, it's not surprising that a recent survey finds more Americans are unhappy now than at any time in the last 50 years...Indeed, it's a heavy, burdensome time in our world. (3)

In the midst of it all, Jesus comes to us, today...in Matthew's Gospel, with an invitation...often called the Great Invitation. He says, "Come!" Who should come? All! All who are what? All who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. And what does Jesus offer? Rest! Rest for our souls!

So...how are you? Really? Have you recently heard anyone say...or perhaps you yourself have uttered these words: Anxious. Afraid. Bone tired. Exhausted. Stressed to the max...drained...running on fumes? If so, then Jesus's invitation is exactly what you need! To come to him for rest. To follow the example of the One who, when he was exhausted and stressed, regularly withdrew to a quiet place, to meditate...to pray, to rest.

How do we do this? There are lots of ways. And we each do this differently, no doubt. I listen to music. Daily I feed my wild birds and squirrels (my "fat fuzzies"), and I enjoy the flowers we've planted around the parsonage. I'll head down to the Fox River a couple days a week, between 8 and 9PM, and throw my fishing line into the swift current, hoping to catch smallmouth bass. (I lose a lot of lures on the rocks, but I do catch fish!) Often, my wife and I will walk around the ballfields in the lovely park right in front of our house. Or we'll take a leisurely drive up to Lake Geneva in Wisconsin on my day off. And throughout, I listen for the voice of God...in nature, in others, in situations that arise, in music, in scripture, meditation and devotions.

In today's text, Jesus actually offers two invitations. First of all, Jesus invites us to come to him...to cast our cares upon him. Secondly, he invites us to take his yoke upon ourselves and learn from him. Yokes were common-place in Jesus's day. Yokes were placed on oxen to plow the fields. Yokes were also laid on the necks and shoulders of prisoners of war and slaves. Interestingly, N.T. Professor Elizabeth Johnson notes, the word "yoke" was used metaphorically with positive connotations. (2) For example, Rabbis used the term metaphorically for the difficult, but joyous task, of learning and obeying the Law, the Torah. I believe Jesus was using the term metaphorically in this way. After all, Matthew's Gospel presents Jesus as a Rabbi, and more than any other Gospel, Matthew emphasizes the importance of learning, of receiving instruction, and acting upon it.

So, what exactly is Jesus's yoke? It's his teaching, his way of life...a life of discipleship. He flat out tells us, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me."

Learn a way of life that is not burdensome, but life-giving. He describes his yoke as “easy.” “Easy” could also be translated “kind.” His yoke is “kind.” Jesus’s way of life is kind. And Jesus, himself, is “gentle” and “humble.” Could you? Could we? Could our country and our leaders use more “kindness” today? Most certainly! Could we use more “gentleness” and less violence—in our homes and on our streets? You betcha! Could we use more all-around “humility?” Of course!

Driving through the country one day, a traveler spotted a farmer plowing with a team of oxen. As the traveler looked closely, he was amazed, for one was a huge ox and the other a very small, young bull. Perplexed at seeing a farmer trying to plow with two such unequal animals, the traveler pulled over to the side of the road and asked the farmer about it. The farmer replied, “See the way those traces are hooked to the yoke? Notice that the little bull is being broken into the yoke, but he’s not actually pulling any weight.” The traveler immediately thought of today’s scripture where the Lord says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.” In normal yoking, the load is equally distributed between the two that are yoked together. But when we are yoked with Christ, he bears the heavy load, while we learn to pull with him and share in the joy and the rewards of the labor.

In many ways, that’s a very good description of discipleship. Of learning Jesus’s way of being in the world. But, don’t be mistaken. Jesus doesn’t call us to a life of ease. Not at all! We will find plenty of challenges, plenty of risks following the Lord. Yet as we learn to live lives of kindness, gentleness and humble service, we will find joy...and true freedom—not slavery. In the words of Elizabeth Johnson, “To take his yoke upon oneself is to be yoked to the one in whom God’s kingdom of justice, mercy, and compassion is breaking into this world...and to find the rest for which our souls long.” (2) Amen.

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- (1) Rev. Dr. Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Dear Working Preacher blog* for July 5, 2020.
- (2) Dr. Elizabeth Johnson, *Working Preacher blog*: Commentary on Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30, July 3, 2011.
- (3) AP News, June 16, 2020: “Poll: Americans are the Unhappiest They’ve Been in 50 years.”