

THE YOKE IS ON YOU! (Matthew 11:25-30)

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
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I don't know about you, but I have enough yokes already! Jesus said, "Take my yoke upon you." The yoke was a wooden frame which hung around the oxen's neck. Joining two oxen together or used for one, it was attached to an implement, a plow for example. It was also used for slaves. When a conquering nation brought back the captives to work in their fields, they would hang yokes around their necks to keep them in line, to keep them in subjection. A figurative use of the word "yoke," therefore, is to imply servitude and subjection, not too pleasant an image for us: duty, responsibility.

I don't know about you, but I feel I have enough yokes already, enough responsibility. I'm a father and husband. I have to earn a living for my family, pay mortgages, pastor a church, lead a congregation. "Hey, no way, not another yoke!" I imagine every mother out there this morning feels that she doesn't need any more yokes: Sunday School teaching, Brownie leader, chauffeur to lessons, games, parties, cook, maid, launderer, etc; and if the mother has an outside job, it is even more complicated. Yokes -- we have enough!

But, Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Is this just a come-on? I've heard that before, haven't you? The recruiter says, "Oh, it is not much work...The committee won't meet that often!" Or, how about advertising? "Try this product; it will make your life so much easier." When you believe it all, the yoke is on you!

The question is: Is Jesus believable? Listen to the entire phrase. Don't we hope it is true? "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus is implying that yokes are inevitable. It is not a choice between a yoke or no yoke, but which yoke, a choice between yokes. Yokes are implements we wear in the pursuit of meaning and purpose. A sense of identity, a sense of belonging, requires a yoke, and most yokes are yokes of bondage. We pride ourselves on being free. We think we are free, beholden to no one, footloose and fancy free. But are we? The youth who is in rebellion against parents' authority and the parents' values will, in defiance of the yoke of family, take on a new yoke, the yoke of a peer group, for example. "What my friends think" now takes on an authority. Some youths even go to the extreme of joining a cult where the yoke with discipline, values and authority is obvious. The strict cults prohibit a youth from disobeying or trying his/her own ideas. Adults trying to find meaning and purpose often join a country club or some similar organization. They take on the yoke of the organization, adopting its values, its language, its relationships, granting authority to the club. To be a citizen, an American, one takes on the yoke of citizenship. We pay our taxes, give allegiance to the flag, obey the authority of government.

In other words, we all have yokes about our necks to which we give allegiance and devotion. Some of these yokes are stringent. Especially in Jesus' day, the yoke of the law was a heavy burden. Jesus in Matthew 23:4, discussing the Pharisees, said, "They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on your shoulders." You could not heal a person on the Sabbath, but you could help a sheep out of a pit. It

was in reference to these cumbersome and heavy laws that Jesus called, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest...For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Jesus is not calling us to abandon our yokes; in fact, we cannot live without yokes. We find meaning, purpose and identity through yokes. What Jesus is inviting us to do is to exchange yokes.

Exchange yokes. In pursuit of meaning, purpose and identity, abandon those yokes which are only heavy and not satisfying. Abandon those yokes which only add to burdens and do not fulfill. Exchange yokes for Jesus' yoke, for in Jesus you find freedom. It may look as if the Christian way is cumbersome and heavy. Go to church. Join a church. Take upon your shoulders the yoke of church membership. Take the vows. Give your word. Serve in the church. Serve in the world. Be a steward of your possessions. Give your 10%. Serve people. Support those causes which make for a better world, a world that Jesus died to create. At first sight, you may say, "I don't need another yoke. I have enough responsibilities"; but we are talking about meaning and purpose, about salvation. There is a legend that says birds first had no wings, and when the Creator approached the birds with their wings, there was much moaning and complaining. "Look what I've invented for you," exclaimed the Creator. "Thanks, but no thanks," complained the birds. "Those things are too large, too heavy. What do you think we are? We can hardly lift them." But, then, they learned to flap them. They began to soar, to fly. Whole new worlds opened to the birds. Now they had freedom. Jesus' yoke is like wings. At first sight, his way looks heavy; but, when you try it, you find freedom, liberty. You can soar. How? Let's look at Jesus' yoke.

First, Jesus was a carpenter, tradition tells us, before beginning his formal ministry. And as a carpenter, tradition tells us, he made yokes for oxen. He was an expert yoke-maker because they fit well. Another meaning for the Greek word which is translated "easy" is well-fitting. The ox yokes were made of wood. The ox was brought, and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then roughed out and laid on the ox. A well-fitting yoke was tailor-made to fit the ox. It did not bruise his neck or rub it raw. There is a legend that Jesus made the best ox yokes in all Galilee, and that from all over the country they came to him to buy yokes.

It may well be that Jesus is using a picture from his carpenter's experience. Jesus' yoke is easy and light because his yoke fits well. He says to you, "The life I give you to live is not a burden to make your neck sore. Your life is made to fit you. The tasks I give you to do, the vocation to which I call you, the ministry I ask you to do in your daily life, are made just for you. Your talents, skills, abilities are made for just what I call you to do and be." In following the will of God, you will find joy and fulfillment because the will of God fits you. Therefore, his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

Secondly, Christ's yoke, his burden, is light upon your shoulders because your burdens are removed. No longer do you carry your burdens alone, by yourself, because Christ now carries them for you. "Cast your burdens on the Lord," is the call. One woman exchanged yokes and lost 100 pounds. She followed the philosophy of AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, took upon her the yoke of Jesus, and lost 100 pounds. She testified, "I gave my problem to God. I told God I was helpless to handle my weight problem. I turned it over to God." In the exchange of yokes, she cast her burden on the Lord, and was freed. Therefore, his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

Thirdly, there is yet another reason that his yoke is easy and his burden is light. In exchanging yokes for Jesus' yoke, you become part of the people of God, the faithful, believing community, where we love one another. Paul urged his churches, "Bear

one another's burdens." When you wear the yoke of Jesus, you find a family of people who are now concerned about you and who will help you carry whatever burden you are carrying. They pray for you, listen to you, support you, encourage you, and you find that your burden is indeed light. And, in turn, you help others bear their burdens. That is the way of Jesus; that is his yoke. You will also find that when you bear one another's burdens, there is no time for loneliness. A lonely Christian is a contradiction in terms. How can one be lonely when there is so much hurt in the world, so much to do? Open your eyes, be alert to hurt, be available, listen, pray, and you will rarely be lonely. And, strangely, as you bear one another's burdens, you will find your own burden, your own worries, your own cares, become lighter and lighter. His yoke is easy because it fits well, and you cast your burden on the Lord and on one another.

I wear the yoke of Jesus on my shoulders, symbolized by the stole which is in the shape of a yoke. The stole is the yoke of ordination. I am in a yoke relationship with Jesus Christ, having assumed the duties, responsibilities, obligations and privileges of a minister in the United Methodist Church. I have taken authority in the church, by the laying on of the Bishop's hands, to preach the word and administer the sacraments. This yoke is my identity.

What is your yoke? The yoke that is on you? To whom or to what are you under authority? Who gives you your marching orders? To whom or to what have you given your life? Whom or what are you trying to please? Some of those drivers in your head are hard to satisfy--voices of the past, tapes of your parents, expectations laid on you by others or by yourself. Trying to please yourself is often a heavy load.

I invite you to take the yoke of Jesus upon you. Exchange your burden for the yoke of Jesus. "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest...for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

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