

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
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“Yoked to Christ”

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Today Jesus speaks words we often hear as an invitation to the sacrament of communion, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.” Then he continues... “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.”

So after last week’s reference to the yoke Jeremiah was wearing, and this reference to Jesus’ yoke... I found myself learning more about Yokes.

First, the meaning of the word yoke is believed to be derived from a word “Yugom” which has roots in many languages including; German, Latin, Ancient Greek, Lithuanian, Sanskrit, Irish, and more, all leading translators to understand the meaning of Yoke as, “join, unite.”

I like that. For most of us it isn’t much fun to navigate life alone. Most, of us enjoy companions, friends, and family to share the joys and sorrows of life.

Anyway, back to yokes. In my research I learned there are different kinds of Yoke’s. If you turn your attention to the screen you will see a picture of a neck or bow yoke. Here a wooden crosspiece is bound to the necks of a pair of animals and held on the animals’ necks with a u-shaped Oxbow which helps transmit force from the animals’ shoulders as they pull.

Next you will see a picture of a Head Yoke. This fits on the head of oxen, behind the horns, and has a carved-out section the horns fit into. This yoke is strapped to the horns of the animal with padding used as cushioning for the forehead.

Finally, you’ll see a picture of what is called a Withers yoke. This fits just in front of the shoulder blades. It is held in position by straps. Withers yokes are particularly suited for cattle which have high humps in that part of their body.

So, one lesson from this? ... not all yokes fit all of God’s creatures.

This morning I want us to think about some of the Yokes we are offered. I think of a couple I know who own a business. The man is a ‘big idea’ kind of guy but his projects often fall apart when the details get too messy, and many of his big idea projects continue unfinished costing the couple lots of money. One day I casually asked the wife if she had any travel plans coming up and she responded, “Well, I pretty much have to work every waking hour to help keep us afloat with all these projects we have unfinished.” A financial yoke is one that can get a tight grip on us, sometimes pushing us away from each other and causing distance and division instead of uniting us.

Second, many of us enjoy the things we buy inexpensively at a significant cost to others. I have an iPhone and I like it. But, the Apple Company does not appear on the list of most moral companies in the world. They face allegations of sweatshop conditions in China, underpaid workers, unfair labor practices, problems related to tax practices, and more. They are not alone as there are many companies which make the mighty dollar more important than morality or fairness. We may find ourselves wondering what sort of damage it causes when we are tied to the yoke of commerce without morality.

There are other yokes we are offered; like politics without principal, science without humanity, pleasure without conscience... in the long run they usually do more damage to us, to our relationships and to the world.

Far too often society begins to look just as Matthew describes, "like children sitting in marketplaces calling out to one another..." I did this for you, what did you do for me? I was sad and instead of comforting me, you laughed and ignored me. Observing a quid pro quo approach to life, Jesus understands how this approach divides us into factions, separating us one from another. Quid pro quo causes us to support our side at all costs; and it creates an enemy, an 'other' we are working to defeat at any cost.

Into this high anxiety, fear-filled, segregated world Christ comes to offer a new yoke. One which unites people in the work of healing and peacemaking. One which joins us together to spread compassion, truth, forgiveness and justice.

When we are tied to other yokes - Christ's path may seem hidden from us. But Jesus provides a way out. Step one Christ says, "learn from me." This is a lifelong process of deepening our relationship to Christ and understanding his call to each of us, and all of us. We don't magically know everything when we finish Sunday school or confirmation. We are lifelong learners through continuing education, new experiences, service, fellowship, worship and prayer.

As we learn from Jesus, we more deeply experience unity with God and God's people; burdens are no longer as heavy because we discover new companions willing to yoke with us through joy, fear and sorrow.

A Desmond Tutu quote begins expressing many of the heavy burdens resulting from the difficult yokes to which we are often tied, he says... "We are living in an historic moment. We are each called to take part in a great transformation. Our survival as a species is threatened by global warming, economic meltdown, and an ever-increasing gap between rich and poor...." There it is, like the nightly news, feels like everything is bearing down on me. My bones tire, my eyes roll. All these problems and little ole me has to solve them all?

But wait... listen to the rest of Bishop Tutu's quote... "Yet these threats offer an opportunity to awaken us as an interconnected and beloved community." That is a powerful image for the body of Christ...

Christ's yoke uniting, awakening all of us as an interconnected and beloved community, a mighty and powerful force in the world. We are yoked together in Christ to pull along wagon loads of justice, to till love, to stir up the ground of forgiveness as we spread the soil -- sewing the seeds of the beloved community.

When the Apostle Paul heard about the divisions and suffering in the church he had helped establish in Galatia, he wrote words reminding them to be yoked to Christ, "there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Creator of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

This is the yoke Christ offers us. When we put it in the larger context; sharing, kindness, justice and compassion... they are easy, and they are light, especially when we have companions to share the journey.

Amen