

## LENT #5: TAKE MY YOKE UPON YOU

(04/02/17)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 11:28-30

*“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.”* (Mt. 11:29-30)

Throughout this Lenten season we have been reflecting on the theme of giving up, specifically giving up that which separates us from God, from our brothers and sisters, and from the experience of new life, the Easter experience that is offered to us by Christ and in Christ. This morning I would like us to consider a different Lenten experience, a different spiritual discipline—the experience of finding new life by taking something on.

This past Tuesday evening at our United Parishes of Southborough Lenten worship services, I preached a short homily on Simon of Cyrene. Simon is not well known, though I suspect he is much better known with Roman Catholics than with Protestants. Simon was the person conscripted into duty by the Roman soldiers to carry Jesus’ cross down the winding Via Dolorosa and up the hill to Golgotha. Simon carried Jesus’ cross when Jesus, weakened by being whipped almost to the point of death, could hardly walk.

The image of Simon picking up Jesus’ cross and helping him carry it is the image that is associated with the Fifth Station of the Cross. This morning I would like to stay with that image just a little longer. I would like us to view it from the perspective of a passage of scripture we read on the first Sunday of every month: Jesus’ words of invitation that comprise the beginning of our communion service. In this invitation, Jesus offers us the blessing of not having to carry our cross, of not having to bear our crosses by ourselves. He offers us the opportunity to be yoked to him that we might carry our crosses together.

As he does so often, in this passage of scripture Jesus utilizes a metaphor; he leaves us with an image. He suggests we take on his yoke, that we become yoked to him. This passage is an invitation, which is why we utilize it as a part of the words of invitation of our communion service. It is also a powerful expression and metaphor of discipleship.

What is a yoke? A yoke is a wooden or iron frame for joining two oxen or other draft animals so they can pull a plow, cart, or other heavy load. In biblical times a yoke generally

consisted of a single crossbar with leather or rope nooses or wooden rods that were fastened around the animals' necks. We find this description in Jeremiah 27:1-2:

*In the beginning of the reign of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Thus the Lord said to me: Make yourself a yoke of straps and bars, and put them on your neck.*

The crossbar was then attached to a shaft that pulled the load.

We find other meanings of the word yoke in scripture. A yoke of oxen is a pair of oxen (1 Samuel 11.7). A yoke of land, usually translated as an "acre," refers to the amount of land a yoke of oxen could plow in one day (Isaiah 5.10). Yoke was also used figuratively as a symbol of hardship, submission, or servitude. Jeremiah wore a yoke to symbolize Judah's submission to Babylon. When the people of Israel considered whether or not they would accept Rehoboam as king, they asked him to lighten the heavy yoke, i.e., the hard service that his father, Solomon, had imposed on them (1 Kings 12.1-12).

The word yoke may refer to other burdens, such as the burden of sin. It is often used as a metaphor for slavery. The image that comes to mind here is that of Sampson, blinded by his Philistine captors, forced to pull the great wheel that grinds the grain in the mill at Gaza, and the hardships endured by the African slaves that we shamelessly brought to this country to serve as beasts of burden.

Jesus, who brought a new revelation of God, turns this metaphor, this image upside down. Jesus transforms the image of being yoked from a burden into a blessing. He also did this with the symbol of the cross. Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon us, to be yoked to him rather than to sin. He also invites us to be yoked to him rather than to the Law, the long list of commandments, the observation of which the ancient Israelites believed would reestablish their connection, their relationship with God and win his love.

The root meaning of the term "religion," by the way, is the Latin *religio*, which means to yoke, bind, or connect. This implies that the matter of being yoked to something is central to our religion; in fact, it is the true function of all religion. With regard to the religious connotation of this term, to what or whom are we yoked? To what or whom are we bound? To what or whom do we become connected through our religious faith and practices?

The first answer, of course, is God. If we are yoked with God, if we are joined to God, if we become one with God, we overcome the separation, distance, or alienation that has arisen

through our sin. Another way of looking at this is that we are not so much overcoming a separation as strengthening a relationship. When we are yoked with God, we become of one mind, one heart. We then find that God's laws are not the laws recorded in scripture but the laws that are written in our hearts.

The second answer is that we are yoked to Christ. Through Christ we become one with God. If we are yoked with Christ we become his disciples. We take on his mind; we learn from him. We take on his heart; we become more loving. We take on his task, his mission. To be yoked to Christ means that we are working together to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth.

A third dimension of this image is that we need to be yoked to each other. We need to take down the walls, the barriers, the prejudices that separate us from our brothers and sisters. We are all children of God, even if we are different, and we need to remember that, as evidenced in creation, God values diversity. We are all in this together. If we do not learn to get along with each other and work together to solve the problems of our world, we will perish not in the fires of the apocalypse but in the fires of war, the fires of our own making.

Finally, as we meet here in worship this morning as the gathered church, we need to remember that we are yoked to this church and that we are yoked to each other through this church. If we are yoked together, we pull together; we pull in the same direction. Our progress in this church may be slow and steady, but we will get the job done. We will build up our church, the body of Christ, that Christ might be present to the world through us.

If we take Christ's yoke upon us, and if we are yoked to this church, we will also be yoked to each other. We will care for each other as Christ cares for us. This is one of the great strengths of this church. We not only reach out to each other in prayer and in a loving, caring presence; we also reach out to people we do not know, people who have come to our attention as in need of comfort, care, and healing, those people who are on our prayer list. We reach out to each other and to the world in so many ways. This is what makes this church so special.

When we are yoked to Jesus, we become not only his disciples but also his apostles. We become his hands and his feet; we carry on his healing, reconciling work in the world. As he promises, when we share his load, when we help to carry his burden, the burden of discipleship, we find that the burden is light. It is light because we carry it joyfully, no matter how difficult the task may be.

But we are not only yoked to Jesus; Jesus is also yoked to us. Out of his great love, Jesus freely chooses to step into the yoke that is already around our shoulders. He offers to share our load, the crosses we carry in our everyday life. When he takes our burdens upon himself; when he takes our burdens into himself, the burdens that wear us down and threaten to rob our lives of joy, we find that our burdens are lightened. They are lightened because we suddenly realize that we are not carrying them alone.

Jesus offers us the same invitation that he offered to his followers, the same invitation that he offered to his disciples:

*Come unto 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.*

Let us enter into this covenant with Jesus, with this church, and with one another as we gather together in his presence to share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. In the words of the notices that are posted around the church informing us of the upcoming D & D Dinner, “There is a place for you at this table.”

A communion meditation offered by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
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