

Zechariah 9:9-12

Psalm 145:8-14

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Sermon for July 9, 2023

THE YOKE OF JESUS

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: My yoke fits well.

Our lectionary suggestion for this Sunday morning has us once again reading two separate passages from a single chapter of Matthew's Gospel. The first seems to express an attitude of frustration on the part of Jesus, a frustration that at least some of the people to whom he was bringing his message were essentially unreachable, because they were the kind of people that my Scottish grandfather would have called *contrary*. Contrary people, in the Scottish way of speaking, are people whose greatest reward in personal interaction is not enjoyment or enlightenment, but rather the pleasure of feeling superior to whomever they're interacting with. The example that Jesus uses involves both himself and John the Baptist. So let's read it first:

Matthew 11: 16-19

I'm reminded of my days years ago as a debater. When you went to a debate tournament, they basically flipped a coin to see whether you would debate the affirmative side of the debate topic or the negative side. So you had to be prepared to do both. What was true didn't matter, only which side could argue more effectively. If you 'won' the debate, your pleasure didn't consist in having gotten to the truth, but rather in having bested your opponent.

Of course, the debate stage is an artificial environment, and the source of Jesus' frustration would have been that some people treat the matters of eternal

importance as if they were equally artificial. The ministry of John the Baptist and of Jesus had very important differences; but what they had in common was they were both ministries aimed at shaking people out of their spiritual complacency and redirect their lives in accordance with the values of eternity, and that they were both ministers whose own lives were entirely, one hundred percent committed to the eternal well-being of those to whom they were ministering. The sort of poignant frustration that Jesus expresses here in our passage is probably emotional kin to the angry frustration that John the Baptist felt towards those who would not respond to his ministry when he shouted at them: Brood of vipers!

What afflicts Jesus the most, what causes him the greatest sorrow, is not failure, not disobedience, not misunderstanding. What grieves him to the heart is indifference.

Let's keep that thought in mind as we move to the second selection from our lectionary suggestion today.

Matthew 11: 25-30

This a beautiful and deep little selection of Christ's thoughts, and I think in many ways it carries forward from the frustration and sense of failure to minister to a portion of his audience that we discovered in our first reading. In this reading, he seems to have put that frustration behind for the time being – perhaps as a problem to be dealt with in some other way, on some other occasion – and instead expresses his appreciation to his Father for those whose hearts have not or not yet been hardened, who are still genuinely curious and sincerely interested, who are hungry to learn, and could not care less about flaunting their wisdom. And does that remind you of anyone?

Children.

But of course, children are open to almost everything, while Christ's focus is on a particular kind of openness, a special kind of hunger. It's the kind of hunger that he himself came to satisfy.

And what is that hunger. Jesus alludes to it when he says "Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to show him."

Not everyone has this hunger, the hunger to know God, to know the character and the ways of God, not as a matter of abstract information, but in order that that knowledge might help to shape one's own life.

When Jesus was expressing the frustration we were discussing a moment ago, he wasn't frustrated with those who have this hunger, but with those who do not, those for whom the nature of God is at most an intellectual matter for debate, not an existential matter for shaping one's own life.

But now he has moved on to those who do have this hunger, and I think it's to them that he addresses the rest of what he has to say in today's reading.

He begins by stating clearly and succinctly the greatest claim he ever made, the claim which is at the foundation of our Christian faith, the claim that He alone can reveal God to those who seek Him. In John's Gospel, John quotes Jesus making the same point in another way, when he tells us that Jesus *said* "*He who has seen me has seen the Father*" (John 14:9) Or as Paul expresses it in his letter to the Colossians: *He is the image of the invisible God.*

The point Jesus is making is this: "If you hunger to see what God is like, if you hunger to know the mind of God, the heart of God, the nature of God, if you hunger to see God's whole attitude of selfless love towards humankind, if you hunger to know how God loves you – look at me."

It is the Christian conviction that in Jesus alone can we see and know what God is like, as it is Christian conviction that Jesus can give that knowledge to all, but to only those who are humbled enough and trustful enough to receive it.

And that leads, I think, quite naturally to the wonderful assurance with which Jesus, as he so often does, concludes, when he has directed us towards a path or way of thinking that, to our ordinary way of thinking, might seem daunting or beyond our abilities or perhaps even doomed to failure. Here he is saying: If you can accept that I am who I say I am, and adjust your life and fortune and way of being in accordance with that ultimate truth, hard as it might seem to do, what you will discover is that it is not hard at all.

The image he uses to provide that assurance is a very strange one: that of the yoke. "Take my yoke upon you," he says "and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

The yoke is not an image you would normally associate with reward! But perhaps we can come to appreciate it if we realize that, in those days in Palestine, if a farmer needed a yoke for his ox, he'd bring the ox to the village carpenter, who would carefully measure the ox, and then carve out a yoke that would fit that particular ox well. The word that was used to describe a yoke that perfectly fit the ox was *chrestos*, and that's the exact same word that's translated in our text as 'easy': my yoke is easy. An alternative and probably better translation would be: "My yoke fits well."

And as an aside, there is a legend from early Christianity that Jesus, during his obscure years as a carpenter in Nazareth, was known throughout the countryside for the quality of his yokes. So well known, in fact, that, according to legend, he had a sign above his carpenter shop that read: My yokes fit well. My yokes are *chrestos*. And it may well be that Jesus was drawing upon his own personal history when he offered this assurance.

Be that as it may, what the legend suggests gives us a clue to understanding our Lord's use of the image of the yoke. The meaning if the image is, I think, two-fold. First, the yoke, of course, is an instrument of labor, an instrument of work. So Jesus is making the point that choosing to bring one's life under his direction will not be an end to effort, and challenge, and perhaps even apparent failure to accomplish much.

But second, and here's the use of the image I'd really like us to focus on, is Christ's blessed assurance that when we turn to him for our yoke, rather than to the world for its various yokes, what is provided for us will be a perfect fit for who we truly are, what will truly reward us, and for how we can be best utilized in service to God.

There's a saying we've all heard: Find a job you love and you'll never work a day in your life. If any young person ever asked me for advice, that's what I'd tell her: I think it's probably the best life advice I've ever heard, and I wish someone had persuaded me of it when I was young.

Jesus of course isn't talking about a choice of profession, he's talking about a choice of him, but his promise is that, once under his guidance, he who knows us far better than we know ourselves, will find a place for us and a task for us that will perfectly fit who we are and what we can do, and what will in fact reward us at the most fundamental level.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, he tells us, for I am gentle and lowly of heart.

He is not presenting himself to us here as our master, as one recruiting us to accomplish his goals; he's presenting himself to us and one who has our best interest at heart, the best interest represented by the most profound of all rewards in the Christian vocabulary: a soul at peace, at rest with itself and with God.

*Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly of heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

And so our prayer for this morning and for this message, Father, is that you set us tasks we can accomplish in harmony with your love and your creation, ends we can pursue with the confidence of eventual achievement, because you have perfectly taken our measure, weighed our strengths, and examined our hearts with divine love and attention, and know where we will find the peace and rest of Christ, in whose name we pray.