

July 5, 2020
Lectionary 14
Matthew 11:25-30

The 5th Sunday after Pentecost
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Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship

Which Yoke?

Last week I heard many people celebrating that a three-day weekend was coming up, a break from their work. Of course, this three day “Fourth of July” weekend was not going to look the way that they’re used to three-day weekends and Fourth of July celebrations looking, but still, it was going to be something, something different, a change in the daily routine.

Perhaps even more than past Fourth of July celebrations, past three-day weekends, it was going to be a rest. When you can’t go to big parties, when parades and big outdoor gatherings are cancelled, I think that many people were looking forward to what might be a restful, and relaxing weekend.

Of course, for some people, working in some fields, there is no such thing as a three-day weekend, but for many, they were looking forward to this weekend as a time of rest, a time of low-key celebration, and perhaps even as a time of reflection, about what it means to be a part of this country, that so boldly claims freedom as its birthright and that has had such difficulty across its history, sharing that freedom equitably.

So, with so many people looking forward to this weekend as a work-free time of rest, perhaps it was particularly bad timing that Jesus’ words in the gospel reading offer rest, but offer rest in the form a yoke, an implement of work, something that is to be carried, perhaps even a new burden.

In our gospel reading for today, Jesus says: “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)

He offers us a new yoke, a new burden, but one that in itself will give us rest. And what is that yoke?

The yoke that Jesus offers is his teaching and example. This invitation to take up Jesus' yoke is found only in the gospel of Matthew. Because of that we look at what has come before in the gospel of Matthew, what teachings, what works of Jesus have come before this point in the gospel to learn what this yoke that Jesus offers us, this easy yoke, looks like.

And that look back at the gospel of Matthew takes us to the Sermon on the Mount, the main source of Jesus' teachings that we are to "learn from him" in the gospel of Matthew.

So, with the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) as our guide we learn that the yoke that Jesus offers us looks like being generous.

It looks like not just loving those we agree with or those we are close to. It looks like not just loving our neighbors or our friends or our family members.

It looks like loving the stranger, and even the enemy and praying for them.

It looks like trusting God to provide for us, and therefore, living without worry.

It looks like being more concerned with trying to modify our own behavior rather than with modifying the behavior of others.

It looks like trying to identify and correct the sin in our own lives, long before we turn to others in judgment.

It looks like building our lives on a firm foundation, which Jesus tells us is the foundation of his words, words that turn us outward and not inward, words that help us to love others, words that help us seek and experience community, even across historical animosity, even across cultural differences, even across challenging complexities of justice and mercy.

The yoke that Jesus invites us to carry, calls us to follow what is called the golden rule, "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matthew 7:12)

I hear an assumption in Jesus' words in our gospel reading for today. He doesn't say, take up a yoke, as though wearing a yoke would be a new experience for us.

He says, "Take my yoke upon you." The assumption here is that there is an exchange going on.

We are not going from wearing no yoke to wearing Jesus' yoke. The assumption is that in taking up Jesus' yoke, we are laying down another yoke, a more burdensome one.

According to Jesus, the ones that he is speaking to are already carrying heavy burdens, they are already weary, they are already stumbling under a weight too heavy for them to bear. This offer of Jesus, to take up a new yoke and to carry a new, a different burden, is an offer to rest, because Jesus will teach us a way of love, a way of peace, a way of gentleness, a way of humility, a way that lightens our hearts.

At the beginning of this lockdown, some of our neighbors vanished into their house. One of their sons, who 11 years old, has a pre-existing condition, which makes him potentially vulnerable to the Coronavirus, so, while the rest of us locked down they quarantined. Their three boys stayed inside for months and the parents only went out for absolute essentials and took serious precautions when coming back into their house.

My boys, who are friends with these children, communicated with them over facetime and zoom and through a shared Minecraft server, but they didn't see them in person until June, after two and a half months.

And of course, it was necessary for them to be careful around their vulnerable friend. They learned to wear their masks and to leave space between themselves and their friends. And they did it with ease and understanding.

I don't have to tell them to wear their masks when they're going out to play with their friends, they do it automatically. The kids in the neighborhood have even

made up a game, that they all play, while wearing masks. The game is a socially distanced version of tag, played on foot and while riding bikes.

When I see the small gaggle of kids on our street, wearing masks, and talking with each other and playing with each other in ways that will keep each other safe from disease, I think, of Jesus' words in today's gospel reading, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will." (Matthew 11:25b-26)

Because for the kids in our neighborhood, children between the ages of 16 and 7, it is natural to wear a mask and to alter the way that they play, it's a simple thing to do to keep each other safe, especially the most vulnerable among them. It is not something to be debated, whether or not they will alter their behavior so that they can play with their friends. Doing it is as natural to them as breathing.

If you read or watch the news, if you look on Facebook, you get the idea that mask wearing is a huge debate in this country and that there are hundreds, thousands, millions of people refusing to do it because they believe that it interferes with their personal freedoms.

I know that there are people like that out there. But I also haven't seen any of them. On those rare occasions that I have been out, almost all of the people that I have seen have been wearing masks.

But I was in the post office last week, mailing something for the church, and I did see my first person, in indoor public space, not wearing a mask.

I was not the only one who noticed. And someone who was a lot bolder than I am turned to the person and said, very politely, "Did you forget your mask?"

I cringed inwardly, thinking, "Oh here, we go, right here in the Norwood post office, we're going to have the mask throw down, a diatribe about personal freedom, a public argument, an intense and uncomfortable encounter, that could perhaps, depending on how heated it gets, become dangerous."

I thought, "We're going to be on the news."

But this is what actually happened. The person who was not wearing a mask looked startled and said, “Yes, I did forget my mask.” And then he got out of line, left the building, and came back in a few minutes later wearing a mask. And we all went back about our business, like nothing had even happened.

Perhaps it’s not just little children, perhaps it’s not just the infants, who have taken up the yoke, and learned the way of doing unto others.

Perhaps more people than we have been led to believe are following the golden rule, that is found in Jesus’ words, but that is also found in the sacred teachings of almost every other religion and culture in the world, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you”.

In last week’s sermon, we heard a tale of two prophets. This week, we hear a tale of two yokes.

One is the yoke that causes us to care only about ourselves, to cling to what we have in fear of scarcity, to harbor anger and resentment, to see other people as enemies, to live in fear that others will get more than us, more rights, more freedoms, more material things.

This yoke teaches us to believe that other people’s well-being is a threat to our own. It is a yoke that is a heavy burden, it is a yoke that wearies.

It is hard work being angry all of the time. It is hard work thinking only about yourself. It is hard work thinking the worst of other people. It is hard work building a life on other people’s oppression. It is hard work believing that is the only way.

The other yoke is the yoke that Jesus offers. It is a yoke that frees, because it turns us away from a life of fear and resentment and turns us outward, toward a life of love, of peace, of generosity.

It is a yoke that frees because we do not bear it alone. The choice we have to make is not between being unburdened or bearing the yoke that Jesus offers. Without question we’re going to carry something. The only question is what we will carry.

Will we carry that which burdens us or will we carry what Jesus offers us? When we carry what Jesus offers us, Jesus helps us carry it. Jesus is in the yoke with us, to teach us how to walk in a new way, to guide us with gentleness and love. And when the going gets hard in this new yoke, Jesus will be with us, at our side, and will give us rest. Thanks be to God. Amen.