

Matthew 11:28-30
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(SPC 7/08)

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) Doesn’t that sound great? We all know that life can be hard ... really hard sometimes, and we do get tired, and we can feel overburdened.

Because, even though our lives can be filled with beauty, and joy, and grace, and blessings, they can also be filled with pain, and hardship, and tragedy, and loss.

I’ve often heard my dad say things like, “It’s a great life ... if you don’t weaken!” But we do weaken. And we do get tired. So Jesus’ invitation to rest sounds really welcome.

But then he goes on to say, “Take my yoke upon you...” (Matthew 11:29) And I’m thinking, wait a minute ... I thought we were talking about rest! Is Jesus really just asking us to trade one burden for another one ... one yoke for a different yoke?

As is often the case, Jesus is speaking figuratively. He’s speaking the language of parable, and using simple, familiar images to teach profound spiritual truths.

In the agricultural society of first century Palestine, the people who listened to him would understand exactly what he meant by being yoked together. A yoke was ... and still is in some places ... a big wooden or iron beam that’s used to bind together a team of draft animals, like oxen or horses.

The yoke holds the animals closely side by side, allowing them to work together to share a heavy load. Often enough, one animal might be a little younger or stronger or smarter than the other one. But that doesn’t really matter much.

Because once they’re bound together with the yoke, everything is shared equally. The two become as one, and are totally dependant on each other.

The lectionary offered a choice of readings for today’s lessons. The gospel reading was actually the same in either case ... with Jesus talking about being yoked together.

But the first reading and the psalm could be chosen from two different options. One set focuses on love and marriage. That’s the one we used today. The other set focuses on God’s covenant with the people of ancient Israel. Either way, the emphasis is on relationship.

The “yoke” that Jesus speaks of is the bond of relationship and inter-dependence.

And, although we can certainly learn something ... about relationship and inter-dependence ... from Jesus' teaching ...

I think it was probably a lot easier for the people of his time and place to understand, than it is for you and me.

And not just because we don't generally get up in the morning and head out to plow our field with a team of yoked-up oxen.

But because culturally we've come to see inter-dependence, not as a sign of strength, but as a sign of weakness. As a people, we celebrate independence. And aren't we having a fine time doing that this weekend?

We like the idea of being strong and independent ... able to stand up on our own two feet. We pride ourselves in our ability to do it all alone. We don't need anyone or anything else.

Independence from some things is good. Independence from political or personal tyranny, or oppression, or abuse is always a good thing.

But independence from God ... is utter madness. Why would anyone want to be independent from their source of life, and love, and peace, and joy, and goodness?! It just doesn't make any sense really.

It has been said that the greatest barrier to our relationship with God ... is our illusion of self-sufficiency. Let me say that again.

The greatest barrier to our relationship with God is our illusion of self-sufficiency. And you know, that might even be a good definition of sin.

In reality, we can do nothing apart from God. Jesus even says that, doesn't he? "I am the vine and you are the branches ...apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Even on the simplest human level, none of us is born, none of us lives, and none of us dies alone. We're utterly and profoundly dependent on God, and on one another.

After all, we're made in the image of God ... and God is relationship. We know God as the community of the Trinity. And God's relentless desire to love spills over and fuels the creation of all that is. Relationship and loving inter-dependence are at the very heart of the universe.

But I think most of us who are here know that already. And we know how hard it is ... how much work it is ... what a burden it is ...to try to uphold our illusions of self-sufficiency.

We know that it's inter-dependence, not independence, that holds us in existence ... and will continue to do so forever. And we're very blessed to have that knowledge.

We can say , with Jesus ... "I thank you God of heaven and earth, because you've hidden these things from the wise and the learned and have revealed them to little ones; for such was your gracious will." (Matthew 11:25-26)

A few years ago, on the last day of one of my annual 8-day silent retreats, I was walking beside the ocean, and thanking God for the time that we had just spent together, in the beauty and silence of the previous week.

Sometimes my prayer is very formal and dignified, and sometimes it's pretty informal, and even intimate. And then sometimes ... it's even a little fresh!

So anyway, as I walked along I was thanking God for such a great retreat. And I sensed God saying, "Thanks for coming!"

And, not to be outdone in freshness ... even by God ... I said, "Well, thanks for having me!"

And then God said ... "I always have you."

I always have you. I'll never forget those words. God always has us ... always, no matter what. We're bound together by a bond of love that's stronger than any old iron yoke. God's love is a bond that's stronger than even death itself.

God always has us. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. And why would we want it to anyway? Independence from God is one yoke that we can definitely live without!

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