

Take My Yoke

Several years ago, before the latest renovation of this sanctuary, I arrived around 7:00 on a Sunday morning, in plenty of time to get things going. I went down to the basement and flipped the switch on the venerable air conditioner, affectionately known as “Big Bertha.” I was prepared for that deafening whine which accompanied Big Bertha as she grudgingly awakened. What I heard was . . . nothing. Big Bertha would not be roused from her Sabbath rest. For the first time in her long life, Bertha had chosen to obey the fourth commandment.

I summoned Jarl Jackson from the church office and we sprang into action. We threw up the double-hung windows, opened all the doors, and left a note on the Choir Room door saying, “No vestments today.” If there had been time, I’d have rushed down to Strong’s Funeral Home and borrowed a gross of those fans with the painting of Jesus on them.

Some of you remember that morning. That Sunday, whether we liked it or not, we all got to experience what it must have been like for the saints who came before us to worship in this place – the women wearing their long skirts with lots of petticoats and the men in their wool suits with high collars. It was an unplanned exercise in cross-generational empathy.

We will have to summon up a similar empathy for the people Jesus addresses in today’s Gospel reading. In a moment, we will ask what Jesus’ words might mean to us in our day, but before we do, we should try to empathize with the people of his day. That takes a little imagination. Big Bertha is no more, but if you like, I could program the thermostat to turn off the air conditioning right now.

No? Very well, then. Imagine that you have done your best to obey all the written and oral rules required of a righteous Jew in Jesus’ day. Like Big Bertha, you try not to work on the Sabbath. You honor your father and mother as best you can. You try to observe the complicated rules for remaining ritually clean. But you are not rich. You have to work for a living, and there simply isn’t time in your day to keep all the commandments. You’d like to study the Torah. You’d like to spend more time in the Temple, but you can’t. You have to feed and clothe your family, and that keeps you busy pretty much from dawn to dusk. You’d like to live a holy life, but ordinary life keeps getting in the way.

Then a man named Jesus comes along. He tells you to take up your cross and follow him and that being his disciple will make members of your own family your worst enemies. That sounds like an offer anyone should refuse. But then he says sometime else. **“Come to me all of you who are working hard and carrying too much, and I will refresh you. Here, take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am gentle and simple at heart, and you will experience refreshment deep down in your lives. You see, my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”** (Translation by Frederick Dale Bruner)

You observe this man Jesus. You see that he breaks a lot of rules himself. He eats with sinners and tax collectors. He touches lepers. He lets his disciples nibble on snacks on the Sabbath. He does seem gentle and simple at heart – at least when he’s not turning over tables and dressing down hypocrites. Most of all, he’s the first preacher you’ve ever met who offered you a path to God without telling you to work harder and carry more.

Can you imagine what that invitation must have felt like to an ordinary person in Jesus’ day? I imagine it must have felt like good news.

Perhaps you’re way ahead of me. Perhaps already you are asking yourself what this saying of Jesus might mean to you – to us – to this assembly gathered round Book and Bath and Table. Before you answer that question, consider these three points.

First, this invitation really is to you. It’s to anyone who is tired of carrying burdens that should not be borne alone, to anyone who finds life too much to bear. William Barclay translates this saying, **“Come to me, all you who are exhausted and weighted down beneath your burdens.”**

Martin Luther exclaimed, “Ah what a strange invitation this is, for Jesus is saying in effect, “My kingdom is a hospital for invalids.”

Even John Calvin, who was not known for lack of moral vigor, said of this passage, “The particle ‘all’ is to be noted . . . lest anyone should shut the door on himself by a perverted doubt.”

Have no “perverted doubt,” my friends. This invitation is to you.

Second, please remember that a yoke is a piece of equipment, not a form of escape. A yoke is a tool for work. Jesus does not say, as we might have expected, “Come to me, all you who are tired, and I will give you a mattress” or “a vacation,” or “a winning lottery ticket.” He offers instead a new way to carry the load.

Despite what you might have heard, the gospel is not an invitation to escape from earthly responsibilities. It's a way of taking on responsibilities not to earn God's favor, but in response to God's grace.

Third, please note that with the yoke comes a relationship. **“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”** Jesus offers not a set of rules, or a prescribed way of worship, or a formula for moral perfection, but a living relationship.

Years ago, the slogan “What would Jesus do?” was all the rage. It was on bracelets, T-shirts, key chains, and anything else that could be sold to make a buck. I even saw a catalog that offered “What-would-Jesus-do?” toilet paper, but I doubt that very many people went that far.

The slogan had its merits. At the very least it prompted Christians to give some thought to their behavior. Jesus probably wouldn't drive drunk or embezzle from his employer. More provocatively, however, nobody ever seemed to ask if Jesus would serve in the Army or support the death penalty. Slogans that sell jewelry and toilet paper tend not to dig very deep.

Jesus in this invitation offers a not a slogan but a relationship. **“Learn from me,”** he says. Go where he goes. Listen to what he says. Watch to see the kingdom breaking through whenever he touches a leper, or welcomes a child, or speaks to a woman he's not supposed to notice. Walk with him. Learn from him. He's not a dusty rulebook but a living, embodied person, the living Word of God.

Years ago, at a Montreat Worship and Music Conference, the preacher for the week preached on this text. I don't remember her name. (That should be a lesson to all preachers.) But I do remember an exercise she had us do. She had us all close our eyes and imagine putting on a yoke.

I closed my eyes. (I'm Presbyterian. I usually do as I am told.) I thought of a heavy wooden contraption that went over my head and rested on my neck. I saw myself pulling a wagon or perhaps a plow, all alone, up a steep hill while somebody shouted orders at me. “Haw! Gee!” (I don't even know what those words mean.)

Then the preacher described an ox yoke that was common in Jesus' day. It was wooden, of course, but it was different from the yoke I was picturing. This was the kind of yoke designed for a brace of oxen. It was, in other words, a yoke built for two, designed so that the animals would walk side by side, bearing the load together.

It's a simple image, but what a difference it makes. I had imagined myself as the bearer of Jesus' yoke and Jesus as the driver. He had the reins to steer, the stick to prod, the whip to punish. **“Take my yoke upon you and I'll teach you a thing or two.”**

But I had it all wrong. He's saying, *Take this yoke I'm offering. I'll put my head through on this side and you put your head through on the other side, and as we walk along together, I'll help you to bear the load that's weighing you down.*

- Maybe it's the load of trying to please your parents. You're forty-five years old, and you're still trying.
- Maybe it's the load of raising children on your own.
- Maybe it's the load of caring for someone who refuses to acknowledge that he or she needs help.
- Maybe it's simply the load of being human in world of rising, superhuman expectations. How could we forget that Jesus knows all about that?

When my twin sister Brenda was beginning her first year as a high school English teacher, an experienced teacher near retirement gave her some advice. "You'll be fine," she said, "But you've got to stay in charge. Just don't let your students see you smile for at least the first six weeks."

Brenda didn't let six minutes go by before she let her students see her smile. She wasn't that kind of teacher.

Jesus is not the kind of teacher who looms over us, barking instructions, or behind us pointing out mistakes. He's the kind who walks alongside us, sharing the load. **"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."**

Compared to the prospect of walking alone and bearing a single yoke hitched to the world's expectations, Jesus' yoke is indeed easy, and his burden light. His personal presence in our lives, his living presence with us now, makes all the difference. As the writer of I John says, **"His commandments are not burdensome."**

Here is an invitation direct from the living Christ. **"Come to me all of you who are working hard and carrying too much, and I will refresh you. Here, take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am gentle and simple at heart, and you will experience refreshment deep down in your lives. You see, my yoke is easy and my burden is light."**

Thanks be to God.