



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Scott E. Schul**

**5th Sunday after Pentecost: July 5, 2020**

**Sermon Title: "Yoked"**

**Gospel Text: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

The closing lines of our Gospel lesson capture, I think, the longings that so many of us are feeling as we've weathered one "new normal" after another throughout this pandemic. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

We Americans don't agree on very much these days, but I think almost everyone would concur that we'd all benefit from *more rest*. Is that an acknowledgement that we could all use more sleep? Maybe. But I think the *real* rest most of us need is a respite from the unrelenting pace of change, our constant worries about economic security, the fracturing of national unity, our fear that we're going to catch the corona virus and end up on a ventilator, and... well, the list goes on and on.

We would all love a Jesus who, with a magic sweep of his hand, wipes away all of those fears, anxieties, and worries that are grinding away at our hearts and bones. But the solution Jesus offers isn't about *eliminating* all of those stresses but, instead, helping us to navigate them in a holy, healthy, and sustainable manner. And so he says "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."

Unfortunately, when *we* hear Jesus speaking about a "yoke," we picture a big wooden crosspiece that connects two oxen as they drag a wagon load of pioneers across bumpy dirt roads. The *last* thing we *want* or *need* is a yoke like *that* around our necks. We already have too many burdens, too many concerns, too many things weighing us down. Why does Jesus insist on piling one more weight upon our sagging backs?

Biblical experts, however, tell us that Jesus was actually referring to a very different kind of yoke. He was using a metaphor commonly employed by Jewish rabbis of his time. That kind of yoke symbolized "the difficult but joyous task of obedience to the Torah" – the law of God.<sup>1</sup> But I'm not sure that makes many of us any more excited for what Jesus is offering. We've been conditioned to think of the yoke of God's law as something that restricts and constrains us, like a strait jacket; as something that can only burden us, not lead us to the rest we so need. And so our first reaction to Jesus's offer is probably, "Thanks, but no thanks."

That's an *understandable* reaction, but it's the *wrong* reaction, because it's a misperception of what Jesus's yoke really is. Think of it this way. Someone who doesn't appreciate the risks of a roller coaster will misperceive a seat belt and safety bar as a horrifying

restriction of freedom and movement, rather than the prudent lifesaving measure it really is. The same is true of the yoke Jesus is offering to us.

You see, Jesus's yoke isn't designed to imprison us in a box of arbitrary rules and false piety. He's not imposing law on us to demonstrate his power or his ability to control us. Rather, he's offering us a *yoke of love* - a *mindset of mercy* - a *pathway of grace* - aimed at freeing us from the innumerable forces of this world that really *do* want to imprison us. Friends, our *true* problem isn't Jesus's yoke, but all of the worldly yokes that are already weighing us down. We've yoked our *lives*, our mental and physical energy, and our *every waking worry* to things like money, careers, security, power, pleasure, popularity, and a host of similar things. I'm not naïve enough to think those things don't matter. We are physical beings. Of course we need shelter, food, healthy human relationships, and a host of other creature comforts to survive. But when those yokes become our primary goal in this life, we've gotten off track. We've selected the wrong yokes. *That's* why we feel so overburdened.

Intuitively, we may acknowledge that Jesus's yoke is preferable, but it's not easy to give up those more familiar yokes, even when we know they'll choke us. Yesterday was Independence Day, so I've got a story from the American Revolution to illustrate my point. It was near the end of the war, and it seemed like the Americans were going to achieve an unlikely victory. But the alliance between the 13 colonies had grown increasingly unstable. They were steadily withdrawing from cooperation and focusing on their own, internal needs. Consequently, many of Washington's officers, soldiers, and suppliers had not been paid for years.

And so on May 22, 1782, one of those officers, Colonel Lewis Nicola, wrote a letter to Washington, to express his view that democracy was doomed to fail. Instead, Nicola proposed that Washington should become King of the United States. Washington angrily rejected Nicola's suggestion, concluding that "you could not have found a person to whom your schemes are more disagreeable." Nicola got the message; he spent the next three days writing three separate apologies to the General. Nicola's crucial error was that he had become so yoked to an imperfect *present* that he was unable to envision the possibility of a better *future*.

Is this your struggle too? Is it possible you've kept Jesus and *his* yoke at arm's length because you've instead invested your hope in the flawed "yokes you know" instead? Reflect a moment. What yokes are you wearing *right now* that are crushing your spirit, diminishing your happiness, and wearing down your soul? You can persist in wearing those yokes the rest of your life but they aren't capable of satisfying the deep restlessness you feel in your heart. The world's yokes will not give you rest.

Today's Prayer of the Day quoted the church father Augustine, who famously wrote, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." Friends, the rest, fulfillment, and peace you're seeking can only be found in Jesus's yoke. He's gentle and humble in heart. He doesn't work through compulsion. He draws us closer through love. His yoke isn't designed to imprison you; it's affectionately crafted to transform your heart by guiding you to greater love for your God and your neighbor. So let your worldly yokes fall away. Become the person God created you to be. *That's* how you'll find authentic joy and rest.

36 summers ago, I set off for my first year of college. I'll be the first to admit that was a long time ago, but I don't think I was much different *then* than most college students *today*. It was my first opportunity to live away from home. A world of experiences awaited me, and I was eager to yoke myself to *all* of them as I centered my priorities on my studies, my relationships, and my entertainment. If Jesus was anywhere on that list, he was far closer to the bottom than the top. But even as I too often forgot *him*, *he* never forgot *me*. He placed the gentlest yoke before me, by somehow quietly persuading me each night to pray the Lord's Prayer right before surrendering to sleep. I still don't know why I started, *but I did*, and all these years later the words of that prayer continue to close out my every day. It was such a light and easy yoke, but one that Jesus used to bless me and gradually draw me closer to his heart overflowing with love.

*Today Jesus is calling you.* What will his yoke look like in your life? Pray and ask him. It's really that simple. Don't be afraid. His yoke is easy and his burden will be light, because it's grounded in love. Those other yokes you're wearing can't bring you true fulfillment and rest. So discard them. Accept the yoke Jesus offers. Like a child, trust in his love. I know you're weary and carrying heavy burdens. The world's troubles aren't going to change. But by the grace of God, *we can*. So come to Jesus, my weary friends. Come to Jesus, and find rest. Amen.

#### Citations

<sup>1</sup>Harper Collins Study Bible, p. 1686, footnote to Matthew 11:29.