

Wesley United Methodist Church
July 5, 2020
Scripture: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
Team Work

“I’m tired today. I’m tired of how challenging everything is. I’m tired of having to think twice about how or when or if I will do something that was perfectly easy to do before March 16th. I’m tired of the awkwardness of things that use to seem second nature. But mostly I’m tired of the way people treat each other these days. I’m tired of the mean-spiritedness. I’m tired of the ‘It’s all about me’ attitudes. I’m tired of being accused of being ‘political’ or being a ‘sheep’. And that makes me angry. But guess what? I’m tired of being angry. I’m trying really hard not to be angry. Because the anger is wearing me out. So peace out people. I’m taking the rest of the day off.”ⁱ

I didn’t write those words. A friend of mine wrote them on Facebook recently, but they could have been my words – and they pretty much express the sentiment that I began with last week. Many of us are finding that life feels more difficult and we are tired. My friend took the rest of the day off. I tend to take a nap or go sit outside and meditate or listen to the birds or read a good book or spend some time with a grandchild. All of these are helpful, and all of these are temporary. We are not running a sprint here friends. We are running a marathon and that means that we need strategies for the long haul.

Into all of this comes Jesus with the words, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Sounds really inviting and hopeful doesn’t it? But then I’ve often looked a little askance at the next words. “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.”

Excuse me? I’ll take the rest, but taking on a yoke? The image of a yoke conjures up images of oxen bound together with heavy wooden frames doing hard work. I’d rather pass, if you don’t mind.

I’d be much more content if Jesus said, “Here, hand your burdens to me. Let me carry them for you. Get some rest.” However, Jesus never promised to take away our burdens. He never promised to make all our problems go away. He offers us comfort

and rest, but it also involves an act of trust on our part. We need to take his yoke upon us and learn from him. So, maybe we need to look at this yoke idea a little more.

Yokes are actually an efficient way to carry a heavy burden. There are two kinds of yokes, single ones and double ones. A single yoke is typically used by one person to



carry things like heavy buckets of water.

The yoke going

across the shoulders helps to spread out the weight and makes it possible to carry much more. However, it also takes a toll on one's shoulders and back and a person will tire easily and have to sit down and rest.

But that's not the kind of yoke Jesus is inviting us to take up. It is however, the kind that we often do carry. Certainly living where we do, we don't literally carry yokes like this, but we do carry around many burdens, worries, concerns, responsibilities, things we think we must do, should do, ought to do and on and on. Often, we try to carry this by ourselves. We try to do whatever it is we are doing by ourselves.

We may think it's a sign of strength to do things on our own. Some of us may believe that the only way to please God is to load ourselves up with heavy requirements. Certainly, that's what many people believed in Jesus' day. There were many rules that good Jewish people tried to follow and remember that Jesus was a Jew. Someone who devoted himself to study of the Torah or Jewish law was said to take upon himself the "yoke of the Torah".

Yokes were also a powerful symbol throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, what we often call the "Old Testament". They are used by some of the prophets to talk about the yoke or burden of oppressive governments or people who take economic advantage of others. Some in Jesus time would have talked about trying to throw off the yoke of Rome and, indeed, that's exactly what many people expected Jesus to do.

So when Jesus spoke about taking his yoke upon oneself, people would know this was something important. Unlike the yokes of so many others, Jesus says that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

The yoke that Jesus describes is not the singular yoke that we so often take upon ourselves. The other common form of a yoke was a double yoke or a shared yoke. Barbara Brown Taylor, in a sermon on this passage, writes that with a shared yoke, “if the two animals are well matched, they can work all day, because under a shared yoke one can rest a little while the other pulls. They can take turns bearing the brunt of the load; they can cover for each other without ever laying the burden down because their yoke is a shared one. They have company all day long, and when the day is done both may be tired, but neither is exhausted, because they are a team.”ⁱⁱ

This is the kind of yoke that Jesus invites us to take – one that we share with him. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.”

A double or shared yoke was also used to train inexperienced animals. The less experienced animal would be yoked with a more experienced one so that the one with less experience could learn by working with the other.



If we accept and step into Jesus’ yoke then he will be working with us, side by side, and we will be learning from him. It means trusting that the One who knows our needs better than we know them ourselves will help us carry our burden. This results in a lighter load for us. Jesus’ presence with us balances the weight of the pressures upon us. When we depend upon Jesus to help us then we can also come into a deeper relationship with the One who knows us better than we know ourselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

So, what I have come to realize is that we get to choose what kind of yoke we will wear, or how we will carry the loads of life. We can choose a single yoke; we can choose to try to do it all on our own. Thinking that we are strong, independent, not needing anyone else, and becoming weighed down more easily by the weight we place upon ourselves.

Or we can choose the shared yoke, the one where Jesus is our partner; where we do not need to carry the weight by ourselves, We can choose to share the yoke with Jesus and learn from him – learn how to carry the load, how to help others carry theirs, how to be partners with others in the often hard work of life. We can choose the shared

yoke where we can find rest. We can choose to share Jesus' yoke and have a companion on the journey.

Life is often difficult, and this year seems more so than most. Dr. Jim Denison, in his devotional, "The Daily Article" wrote on Wednesday, July 1st: "The year began as 1973 with impeachment. Then it became 1918 with the pandemic. Then 2008 (and hopefully not 1929) with the recession, followed by 1968 with civil rights protests.

"Kobe Bryant and his daughter died in a helicopter crash along with seven others. Wildfires swept Australia. Locusts swarmed East Africa. Earthquakes struck Turkey and the Caribbean. And as of today, the year is officially only half over."^{iv}

Many of us are tired but the Covid 19 virus is not. We are being reminded again of the dangers of being Black and those of us who are white are being challenged to really pay attention this time, to look honestly at our own lives and at the inequities in our system and to not let our short attention spans divert us to something else when we become uncomfortable. We are facing a presidential election in the second half of this year and I'm already tired of the rhetoric but I know that I need to pay attention and that I need to make very important decisions about who I believe is best qualified to lead this great country of ours.

In this Independence Day weekend, in this weekend when we celebrate the birthday of our country, I am remembering that what I knew and did as a child, was different than what I knew and did as a young adult, and what I know and do today as an older adult is different yet. It's called change and growth and we expect it in people, and we should expect it in our country as well. There is no shame in saying we made mistakes and did things that were wrong, but the question is what we are going to do once we know and understand what we have done wrong.

All of these important parts of life involve a long term commitment; they are a marathon, not a sprint, and the only way I can imagine that we can survive this and do more than survive, but grow and thrive, is if we step into the yoke that Jesus offers us and allow him to help us carry the load.

When what we are going through seems beyond our ability to carry it, that is exactly when Jesus calls us to surrender the idea that we need to do it alone, and trust that God's way is better than ours; trust that with Jesus as our partner, together we can

face anything. When we learn from Jesus, we can help others as well and together we can all share the load.

As Jesus invites us, “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.”

Let us pray:

Our loving God, we are so grateful that Jesus invites us to take his yoke rather than all the yokes that we so often place upon ourselves and try to carry alone. Help us to trust that you are, indeed, with us in all of the challenges of life and that with you we are better able to meet those challenges and may even find that they bring us closer to you in whom we find our comfort and rest. Amen.

ⁱ Facebook post by a friend (Laura E. Merrill Church) on June 18th at 12:07 pm.

ⁱⁱ Brown Taylor, Barbara. “The Open Yoke” in Seeds of Heaven c.2004, p.21

ⁱⁱⁱ Feasting on the Gospels Matthew Vol. 1.

^{iv} Denison, Dr. Jim. The Daily Article July 1, 2020