

Seventh Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)
Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30
July 3, 2005
Manasquan, NJ

This is the second time in a week that I have read this Gospel from the pulpit. The first was at Edith Marshall's funeral on Wednesday. Edith was 96 years old and had lived a very busy, loving and fruitful life. This seemed a fitting Gospel to acknowledge that her Lord had given her permission to put her burden down and to enjoy a well-earned rest!

This is the one of those Scriptures that many folks hold close to their hearts as a "favorite" and may even have memorized:

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 of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. Matthew 11.28-30

Part of the earthly burden Edith carried was her body's weakness, her failing eyesight, her painful shoulder. Some of you are "weary" from physical illness, too, and will come to Wednesday evening's healing service to bring that burden before the Lord's altar, to lay it at His feet, to take a break from shifting its weight. Others among us carry the heavy burden of worry for a loved one who has been diagnosed with a serious illness, or who serves overseas in or near combat. The heavy burden of depression threatens to break the back of many.... **Un**employment or **under**employment weighs heavily on others. The **un**-peace that accompanies family conflict is a crushing burden under which some of us also stumble.

Most, maybe **all** of us know what it is like to wake in the morning under a pall of dread. For whatever reason, there are days when getting out of bed seems to require more energy than we can muster. The burdens of the previous or upcoming day weigh so heavily upon us that we have to mount a nearly superhuman effort to go from being prone to upright. Our hearts are emotionally and spiritually heavy laden.

And what does Jesus say? Not that He will carry us **or** our burden, but that we should **go** to Him....

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 of heart, and **you will find rest** for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

In this life He **doesn't** actually offer us “the blessed rest of everlasting peace” that we talk about in the funeral service, the gift He has now given to Edith. In **this** life He invites us to exchange **our** burden for **His**, to trade the burdens **life** gives for the burden **He** gives.

Our Lord Jesus was a **carpenter** in Nazareth before He hit the road, called His first disciples and began His public ministry of preaching, teaching and healing. It was the local carpenter who made wooden yokes for oxen and other beasts of burden. Jesus, the carpenter, says that we should **accept** His yoke, which is “easy,” or literally “kind,” meaning well-shaped, tailored to the animal’s neck so that the yoke does not chafe against its skin as it works.

It was not just animals that wore yokes in Jesus’ day, but also people. Prisoners of war and slaves could be seen wearing yokes, a sign of their subjugation, enslavement,

sub-human status. What a sad sight, to see a human being yoked like an ox.... And yet **Jesus** draws that picture of **us**!

Here's the difference, though, between the mental snapshot of a Roman slave wearing a shameful collar of wood and of **us** freely taking Jesus' yoke upon us. We are not in a single yoke pulling our burden alone. We are in a **double** yoke, teamed up with Jesus, pulling **together** the load He assigns. When Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you," He is saying, "**Become my yoke mate. Harness yourself 'to God** in the joy of obedient life...." (*Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament, Matthew*, p. 159)

The prospect of wearing a yoke is not **initially** appealing to anybody. What a constraint! What a personal prison! And yet -- there is a story that birds initially were created without wings. They loved what they knew: the status quo. They complained when they learned that they'd be getting wings, because they could only imagine the extra weight would drag them down and make life burdensome. It's not until they experienced themselves soaring that they realized that the wings they had dreaded enabled them to fly....

The choice for us is not **whether** we take a yoke, but which one we opt for. Life presents many yokes for us to wear, churns out many burdens for us to bear. We can put our head down and plough life's field alone, or we can stick out our neck, accept Jesus' yoke, and team up with Him for the sake of the Kingdom. Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you and **learn** from me...." The Greek word for "learn" is the root of the word "disciple." To learn from Jesus means to follow Him, to be His disciple, His apprentice, not just to **know** but to **live** what He preaches. One commentator has said:

Discipleship is both yoke and burden, yet it neither oppresses nor crushes. Because it means being yoked to God's Son (v. 27), to his

indestructible life, to his majestic and surpassing authority, to Jesus once crushed underfoot but now highly exalted, it is easy and it is light. (*ACNT, Matthew*, p. 160)

On this Independence Day weekend, we remember that true freedom is “liberty,” not “libertinism.” We’re acutely aware that the sacrifices of our forefathers and foremothers, and of all who have fought and died to preserve our liberty, resulted in our being **freed for** holy living, not simply **freed from** unholy tyranny. As Christian citizens of this great country, we are not “free agents,” for we are **yokemates of Christ**. As Saint Paul reminds us, “You are not your own; you have been bought with a price.” Our most important ransom has been paid not in the blood of Revolutionary War, Civil War, World War I or World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Gulf War or Operation Iraqi Freedom heroes, but the blood of Jesus Christ. The greatest sacrifice didn’t happen on a battlefield but on Calvary. It involved not a warrior but a carpenter, the Son of God.

Freedom from sin is even more valuable than freedom from tyranny. Freedom from death frees us up to give our life for causes greater than ourselves. As Christians who also happen to be Americans, it is **not** true that we bow to no one. By the power of their Holy Spirit, we bow our knee to the Lord of heaven and earth and we bow our neck to the yoke of our Lord Jesus Christ. Freed from sin, death and the devil, yokemates of Christ, we are of all people, most truly free. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Olson