

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
July 5, 2020
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Zechariah 9:9-12
Psalm 145:8-15
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

These are comforting words. Reassuring words. Now more than ever.

We're all getting a bit weary these days. That's clear, if only from the reckless abandon with which so many responded to the initial phase of re-opening: it's like "spring break" at our nation's beaches and bars, not so much gradual emergence. And our weariness shows in the impatience so many express with the ongoing – or renewed – imposition of restrictions.

And if it's not worry or impatience over COVID-19, the weight of racism and civil unrest afflicts our nation and troubles our souls. It is a heavy burden for us all.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

We should, I think, hear these words of comfort and reassurance, and take them to heart.

But take this to heart, as well: there is a challenge in this morning's gospel, for Jesus immediately adds this to his invitation of rest:

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me ...

Jesus offers rest even as he calls us to share his burden. Both sides of that coin, I think, are true.

There's an irony NOT lost on me. Last Sunday, I elaborated on the backstory to our reading from Jeremiah. Before where our reading picked up then, I told you how Jeremiah had taken a yoke. He put it on, he said, as a sign of what was to come:

- Babylon would lay a heavy yoke on God's people;
- the people would be treated like oxen; and
- they would have to carry this burden for the next seventy years.

Jeremiah told them, in essence, that they'd better get used to hard times and hard labor.

And now, this morning, Jesus comes speaking of a yoke. But this yoke, he says, is not heavy. It does not demean us. It does not treat us like oxen. It offers rest somehow: this yoke is easy, the burden light.

It's hard to reconcile what Jeremiah said about a yoke with what Jesus says.

When Jesus speaks of a yoke, the yoke he offers is not one that he imposes, but one he already wears. And if you go online to see what a yoke actually looks like, you'll see that there are no single-user yokes, they're double yokes, designed not to force an animal to pull alone but designed for animals to work in tandem. The yoke Jesus imagines for us is not a yoke of servitude (built for bondage); it's a tool of connection, a way to be in relationship with all that is holy and life-giving, a way that promises to make our work easier, not more difficult.

So if we are weary these days, worn down by the heavy burdens of our times, understand the offer before us. We need not carry the weight of the world all alone. It's an encouragement, I think, for us to seek that which can genuinely refresh and renew us, body and soul. Find your center in that which is holy and life-giving; dwell where peace and love take root within you.

The Roman Catholic priest and theologian John Shea offers a cautionary tale if we should fail to avail ourselves of this wisdom:

Many years ago a young woman came to see me. I had known her as a teenager. She was intelligent and vivacious and had been admitted to one of the top colleges in the country. When she walked in the door, I was shocked. She was unkempt and seemingly exhausted. She had dark semicircles under her eyes.

I asked her immediately if she was sleeping enough. She avoided the question and began a long, rambling, and confusing story. I set her up with a psychologist who had her tested. With her permission he told me the results of the testing.

After he had shared the diagnosis, I asked him, "What about the obvious fatigue, the rings under her eyes?"

He said, "Oh, as a theologian you should know the answer to that." I didn't say anything. He continued, "God doesn't sleep."

"I don't get it," I said.

"She has to control everything. She can't trust enough to sleep. If she rests, everything might come tumbling down. Her body is exhausted because her mind is ever vigilant."¹

This is the first side of the coin: we are not God. Even if God doesn't sleep, we do; we need to:

Come to me ...

I will give you rest.

And yet there is another side to that coin. Even as Jesus invites us find rest and help, he still calls on us to share the yoke he himself has shouldered. The yoke of Jesus intends to be of help to us, but it does not release us from the work that is still ours to do.

And in spite of the words we just heard this morning, the work isn't necessarily "easy." Rather than saying his yoke is easy, a better translation of what Jesus says about his yoke is that it fits us. Rather than saying the burden is light, Jesus is offering to help us – that together we might find enough strength to shoulder what remains for us to take on in this life.

And make no mistake: as long as this world fails to line up with God's dream for the world (and for our community and our nation) and for all God's creatures, there is work for us to do. As we continue to wrestle with the viral and social pandemics of our times, there is some heavy lifting for us.

Jesus isn't giving us a pass on doing the work ahead of us. Instead, he's inviting us to learn from him how to live and how to love. Not for the first time in Matthew's gospel. Nor the last.

As we celebrate Independence Day this weekend, I'm reminded of that "last time" Jesus showed us how to live and how to love. My reminder is sparked, actually, by our reading from Zechariah this morning. It reminds me of the Jewish Independence Day we know as Passover. And the reason that reading reminds me of Passover is because this passage is so clearly part of our remembrance of Jesus' final Passover – our Palm Sunday.

When Matthew tells the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, he quotes the opening verse from this morning's reading from Zechariah:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.*

It's clear that Jesus found inspiration in this prophetic text, so much so that he used it to make a point as he arrived in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover that year.

Our own Marianne Borg, among others, has pointed out how provocative this entry was. In one of the "Continuing the Conversations" she offered here (with Bill Ellis), she said that Jesus "burlesques" Pilate – and the crowd would have loved it. It was a prophetic act.

She and so many others have noted that there were two processions into Jerusalem that Passover. Pontius Pilate entered Jerusalem through one gate, riding a warhorse. It was a display of imperial power and theology: cavalry on horses, leather armor, helmets, weapons, banners. It was the *Pax Romana* – "law and order," a peace imposed by military might.

Meanwhile, Jesus entered the city through a gate on the opposite side of the city, riding on a donkey, palm branches waving in the air. ⁱⁱ

In his Easter Message a few years back, our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, called our attention to what was happening that fateful Passover in Jerusalem:

Jesus entered the city at the same time as Pilate to show them, and to show us, that God has another way. That violence is not the way. That hatred is not the way. That brute force and brutality are not the way.

Jesus came to show us there is another way. The way of unselfish, sacrificial love. That's why he entered Jerusalem. That's why he went to the cross. It was the power of that love poured out from the throne of God ...

And since this was his Easter Message, Michael Curry insisted that it all anticipates Easter. With the Resurrection, God affirms that (when all is said and done in this life) "Love wins!"

In terms of today's gospel, then, we might discern that the yoke of Jesus is shaped like a cross ... that the yoke of Jesus is shaped like love.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart ...

This Independence Day weekend, Jesus invites us to take his yoke and carry it with him. Jesus invites us to learn from him: how to live in freedom – not freedom from restrictions or obligations toward those who share this world with us, but freedom to live as God intends for all of us to live in this world, freedom to let love rather than fear or personal privilege chart the course of our life, freedom to do what needs to be done to make this world – and, yes, this nation – line up with God's dream for us and all who share this world with us.

We do not have to carry all of life's burdens alone. But we have work to do. May the words of Jesus – in this morning's gospel and throughout the whole of that sacred text – show us the way ahead: the way of life; the yoke of love.

Or as Eugene Peterson has rendered those words of Jesus:

Are you tired? Worn out? ...

Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

ⁱ Marianne Borg's observation of Jesus' procession as a burlesque/prophetic act made at St. Helens Hall on April 13, 2019. Other details of the two processions – a military procession and a peasant procession – come from Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan in *The Last Week* (HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), pp. 2-5.

ⁱⁱ John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minn., 2004), p. 223.