

The UMC of Berea  
Romans 7.15-25a; Matthew 11.16-19, 28-30  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

*Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.*<sup>1</sup>

Who is not feeling at least a little burdened—a little wearied, needing rest—these days? We are carrying heavy grief over the loss of so much: so many lives to COVID-19—as of yesterday, almost 130,000 in the U.S., more than a half-million worldwide. And the lost jobs and livelihoods and accustomed patterns of living; the inability to meet face-to-face, to gather, to embrace, to comfort and console and celebrate in person: all of it, a deep, aching loss. The shutting down of so much, the spikes in illness as we struggle to re-open while still caring for one another, the disruption of so many plans for so long, without any sense of a real “end” in sight.

Add to that the hard realities and difficult truths about ourselves and our society that have been exposed yet again in recent months: inequalities in access to quality healthcare; persisting disparities in educational opportunities; pervasive injustices woven into the fabric of our life together, leaving certain groups of folks more vulnerable than others. It can feel very much like we've been “struggling hard and carrying heavy loads.” In the immortal words of Fannie Lou Hamer, many of us are “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

*Come to me, all you who are sick and tired of being sick and tired, and I will give you rest.*

Jesus' invitation this morning begins simply: by noticing and then naming our condition. What a gift that is: a beautiful example of “radical empathy”—an exercise in true compassion—to come alongside us, to notice, and to name. *You've been struggling long and hard.*

And then, Jesus invites us into a different way:

*Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.*

If we will come to him, Jesus says, then he will give us rest: if we will put his yoke upon ourselves.

Now, that is an interesting image, of course, even if not immediately accessible for most of us. A yoke is a tool used with draft animals: donkeys, horses, oxen—animals trained to carry heavy loads. Specifically, a yoke is used to guide these animals and to tie two or more of them together. And so, by offering us his own yoke—inviting us to put his yoke upon ourselves—Jesus is inviting us to join him in the work he's been doing: to come alongside, to link our lives together, to be inseparably joined.

In the context of this invitation to come and find rest, this might strike us as a little odd. Jesus does not say to us, “Come to me, and I'll give you rest. Here's a recliner and a cold lemonade. Put up your feet and relax.” Instead, he says, “Put on my yoke, and learn from me. And you'll find rest for yourselves.” Not rest *from* the work but rest *in* the work, as we join our lives to Jesus' life, joining with the Spirit in the work of building a more just, more peaceable world.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11.28-30 (CEB)

In the Gospel of Matthew especially, Jesus is described often as a master teacher. One of this Gospel's favorite designations for Jesus is *rabbi*, teacher, and so this invitation to "learn from me" is best understood within that light.

By this point in the Gospel, already Jesus has done some pretty remarkable, pretty challenging teaching: the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7 and some demanding parables sprinkled along the way. One of the reasons Jesus' teachings are so challenging and so demanding is that they are not simply giving us new information. They are commanding us—or, if we want to soften that a little, they are "inviting us"—into a more demanding way of life.

Jesus begins today's Gospel lesson by lamenting that so many folks have been criticizing rather than following him. He invited them to dance, he says, but they refused. Instead, they called him "a glutton and a drunk," always out partying with the "wrong sort of folks."

Associating with the "wrong sort of folks," of course, always was—*itself*—part of his teaching. That's the other reason Jesus' teaching can seem so demanding: he does not just float interesting ideas out there for us to consider; he embodies his teaching and expects us to do likewise. The teacher's own life is the content of his teaching.

So, for example, in that Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches us to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, and to be willing to suffer in the cause of seeking real justice. By the end of the Gospel, Jesus himself will do all that and more.

And yet, at the same time, Jesus makes today's strange claim. After some very challenging, very demanding teaching, he claims that his yoke "is easy to bear" and his burden "is light." How can that be?

Well, for one thing, because we believe Jesus is not just some "wise teacher" but, in fact, is the very incarnation of God—perfect love in human flesh—then not only does he teach with divine authority, but his teaching actually is a *description of reality*: the way the world really is put together. Jesus' teachings—Jesus' life—are our window into the way things really are. In other words, the world really is put together with loving-kindness and justice for all people—with equity and liberation and sacred worth. That is how the world has been built, down to its very core.

And so, Jesus' invitation to us to "come to him" and to "put on his yoke," is an invitation to come back to the way things really are, to come back to living our truest identity as God's beloved, to come back to ourselves: living as creatures made in the image of perfect love. Jesus' invitation is to shake off those other "yokes" we've been wearing—our anxieties and our fears, our hatreds and our unforgiveness, our cynicism that things will never improve—and to put on the yoke that was made for us—really, the yoke of love for which we were made.

Of course, all that is easier said than done. Jesus' way of living doesn't come easily to us. The counter-currents of our culture are incredibly strong, insisting on our deficiency, depending on our fears, deepening our divisions from one another.

Forgiveness and compassion and radical empathy—stepping out of our privilege and choosing real solidarity with our most vulnerable neighbors—advocating for the well-being of our community as a whole, even when doing so will mean a cost to ourselves—turning the other cheek, loving our enemies, being willing to suffer in the cause of justice for all: none of this comes to us easily. We must unlearn some old patterns so we can re-learn some new ones, bending our lives in the direction of God's dream.

This morning's words from the letter to the Romans gives us a sense of the struggle all this can be:

*I don't know what I'm doing, because I don't do what I want to do. Instead, I do the thing that I hate.... The desire to do good is inside of me, but I can't do it. I don't do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don't want to do.... [A]s a rule, when I want to do what is good, evil is right there with me.<sup>2</sup>*

Through the raw honesty of these words, we witness a conflict most all of us will know well. It is the conflict between *who we are in God*—beloved children—and *who we are being pulled to be* in the context of our culture. It is the distance between our *ideals* and our *reality*: the sort of people we have set out to become and the sort of people we presently are. It is a distance that exists in our life together, too: for example, the vast chasm between our lofty ideals as a nation and our lived realities. The deep pain caused by that distance is being expressed by so many these days.

According to Jesus, it is that distance—that difference between who we are intended to be and who we now are, between how we are created to live and how we are now living—that is at the root of our deep weariness. We are not meant to live in isolation. That is why it is so fatiguing to be apart. We are not created to claim superiority over others. That is why it is so painful to live with injustice. We are made in the image of love and not fear. That is why it is such a struggle to be at odds.

And thus, Jesus' claim today: the burden of living God's different way in the world really is a blessing. To wear the yoke of God's love around our necks is to be kept moving in the right direction, the life-giving direction—moving together toward that loving place, that new creation, that beloved community toward which God is always drawing us together.

“Are you tired?” Jesus asks in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Matthew 11:

*Are you worn out? Are you burned out? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life.... Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.... Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.*

What a gracious, generous invitation. And we live into it by taking off those old yokes—those old expectations and cynicisms and patterns—and entering God's new way of life. There's still much work to be done, to be sure—still a yoke to be worn, still God's love to be loosed in the world. But it's life-giving, not life-depleting. It's the work for which we've been made. And when we do it, even *in* the work, we find our rest in God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 7.15, 18b-19, 21