

World Weary ...“take my yoke upon you ...”

Matthew 11:16 -19, 25 -30

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

July 5, 2020

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

In this time of physical distancing, I find one of the most highly trafficked aisles at Target or the grocery store is the chocolate corridor. After walking up and down a few lanes at Jerry’s completely on my own, I once found myself in a traffic jam of four people and carts clustered in front of the Ghirardelli, Lindt, and Toblerone. No one gave way. We put our lives on the line for chocolate. Pre-Covid, I kept a stash of chocolate in the church office – not my office – I had to go downstairs for a fix – it is also there to share. I agree with J. K. Rowling on this, chocolate is medicinal. If ever there was a time for comfort food, comfort movies, and the comfort of the Earth, it’s now.

Organizations like Presbyterian Disaster Assistance know the emotional pattern of human response in a time of disaster – the Episcopalians have gone so far as to put it on a graph. First, there is the dip of the crisis and very quickly there is a rise as we all band together and say, we’ve got this. We could see that happening all around us in those last weeks of March and into April. And then we realized this was going to stretch out far longer than originally expected; the unemployment filings started to skyrocket, and the disease took one of our own. This leads to the second phase in the emotional response graph, a deep dive into the litany of losses– Gale Robb preached on this last week – we are in a season of lament, a corporate lament that, as a country we have needed for a long time.

When we take a rubber band and stretch it all the way out and hold it, it eventually loses its capacity to return to its original size. And if we are stretched out – when human beings are stressed out, all the time, we lose our ability ‘roll with the punches,’ to cope with one more thing. There is a difference in episodic stress (which can bring out creativity and community) and chronic stress which wears a person down, body, mind, and soul.

We cannot see the virus. We can protect our neighbor by wearing a mask and keeping physically distant. We cannot get a respite from the presence of the virus. The rubber band was stretched out weeks ago. So, we were short on flex in the days of unrest following the death of George Floyd. These days are not as intense but the work ahead of us becomes clearer and deeper and broader every day. And, we are weary – world weary. The familiar verses from today’s reading are very welcome indeed. “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 light.” These words adorn the gate leading into the St. Mary Chapel at the National Cathedral in Washington D. C. When I saw them there, I was immediately drawn in to sit for a time. Yet, at another point in life, in the midst of what Lemony Snicket referred to as a series of unfortunate events, I wanted to debate it; I wanted to know why it goes from “I will give you rest,” to “take this yoke upon you.” At that time, it sounded like an offer to make the burden heavier. The answer is agricultural.

A yoke is used to connect two oxen doing one task – to use a yoke is to share the work or the burden. Jesus’ offer to share a yoke is an offer to help carry, pull, or plow through whatever is ahead. I try to remember the picture of nearly a city block covered in bags of groceries following the first night of protest, riot and looting. In the midst of the lament, I want to remember that powerful image of neighbor-love. Because I will not forget the look on Derek Chauvin’s face while kneeling on George Floyd’s neck.

Sometimes I think every square inch of this planet has already been fought over – and some folks seem to want to do nothing but continue to fight – as the writer of Ecclesiastes said, “there is nothing new under the sun.” Except that I am an idealist – I used to think this an incredibly beneficial presence but now know is sometimes really not helpful at all. Still, I mention, there is a great new t-shirt available online; it says, “Don’t make me repeat myself,” signed, History. Which is to say, in taking on Christ’s yoke, as in baptism and the whole of Christian life, God is doing a new thing.

Comforting is not the same as comfortable. Comforting is giving comfort – comfortable is to be “in a condition of comfort; not suffering or anxious; hence contented; cheerful; as, to lead a comfortable life.” It can mean providing comfort but more generally means “being comparatively free from pain or distress” (comparewords.com, 6/30/2020, 4:48 p.m.). Jesus is comforting but he does not promise we will be comfortable. Like now.

We need rest for our souls. And also there is kingdom work to be done. As one commentator wrote, “What Jesus offers is not freedom from work, but freedom from onerous labor. Soul-sick weariness is not the inevitable consequence of all work, but rather of work to which we are ill suited, of work extracted under compulsion and motivated by fear, or of work performed in the face of futility. There is also the weariness that comes from having nothing at all to do that truly matters. The easy yoke means having something to do: a purpose that demands your all and summons forth your best. It means work that is motivated by a passionate desire to see God’s kingdom realized. It means work toward a certain future in which all God’s dreams will finally come true. To accept the yoke of the gentle and humble Lord is to embrace the worthy task that puts the soul at ease” (*Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 3, 217).

Though we are world weary, I wonder if the world itself is weary of us. Weary of garbage scows and landfills; of strip mining, fracking, pollution, greenhouse gases, plastics, acid rain, and ecosystem collapse. I believe our planet is sick to death of bombs, land-mines, nuclear devices and weapons of mass destruction. Yes, this is the idealist talking but I believe Mother Earth would simply like to grow enough food for all the children and to provide enough beauty and still waters to heal generations of trauma and war. As Diana Butler Bass wrote, “God does not heal without human hands. The hard work is the possibility” (*Christianity After Religion*, 239). Even though I wrestle with it all the time, I choose the yoke. This stole that pastors wear is symbolic of the yoke of Christ. In my most dedicated moments, I understand why the Catholic priests kiss it as they put it on. But mostly it is an ordinary choice because, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, “I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.” The yoke is the less burdensome way; it is lighter in every sense of the word. The mystics teach us that, “Our deepest freedom rests not in our freedom to do what we want to do but rather in our freedom to become who God wills us to be” (James Finley, Center for Contemplation and Action). “One thing is inescapable,” says Joan Chittester, “the way we deal with whatever happens to us on the outside will depend entirely on what we have become on the inside.” When Jesus says, “my yoke is easy and my burden light,” he is saying the kingdom of God is a miracle that is happening right in our midst, and if we are yoked to him, we are yoked to God’s kingdom.

If we go back to Jesus’ first words from today’s passage – he begins by comparing his listeners to children who pout and sulk when they do not get the emotional response they’d hoped for. To give this teaching a timelessness, Matthew wrote, “to what will I compare this generation”; it is a biblical formula indicating it is meant to speak to every generation: WWII, Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Z – and he suggest that whatever we are doing, we take a pause to seek wisdom. Jesus points to the folly of the actual generation he is speaking to, because they’ve interpreted John’s disciplined spiritual practice of abstinence from alcoholic beverages as demonic and Jesus’ ministry of an open table as gluttony and drunkenness. In each generation and now – probably more generations alive on the earth than ever before – he asks, what do you understand about me and about our joint mission? Are you willing to be yoked with me; are you willing to continue with a humility and gentleness that will heal and restore?

On this July 4th weekend, I spent some time with Quaker educator Parker Palmer through his book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. At the beginning of the first chapter, he is driving with a friend through southern Minnesota; they are going past acre after acre of corn and on the way to a piece of the prairie his friend had restored. When they arrive, his friend explained: “There are more than one hundred fifty species of plants on the prairie – to say nothing of the insects, birds, and mammals they attract – just as there were before we first broke the sod and started farming. It’s beautiful, of course, but that’s not the whole story. Biodiversity makes an ecosystem more creative, productive, adaptive to change, and resilient in the face of stress. The agribusiness land we’ve been driving through provides us with food and fuel. But we pay a very steep price for this kind of monoculture. It saps the earth’s vitality and puts the quality and sustainability of our food supply at risk. The prairie as it once was – a state to which it can be restored – has a lot to teach us about how we need to live” (*Healing the Heart of Democracy*, 11-12). Yes, as an idealist, I hear this as an invitation to nurture body, mind, and soul; to care differently for ecology and economy. Even as we seek rest and comfort, let us also seek the restoration and new life God offers through the yoke of The Christ. Amen.