

Proper 9, July 9, 2017

Fr. Joshua Nelson

Matthew 11:25-30

The last few weeks, our readings have been focused on the cost of discipleship. We have been called to take up our cross, to rejoice in persecution and to expect death in order that we might obtain life. But today, Jesus offers us some reprieve. Now this is not the kind of rest one might get from a vacation, no this is reprieve that comes within the vein of continued work. So what exactly is Jesus calling us to? What is being offered?

The symbol of the "yoke" is not an unfamiliar one to the audience of Jesus' day. Israel at that time, and part's even now, are extremely agricultural. Every one would have known a yoke for its literal use, but also for its symbolism by the prophet's like Jeremiah and Isaiah, and the Jewish Wisdom literature such as Job and Ecclesiasticus.

The teachers of the day often used the symbol of the yoke as analogy for the Law of Moses. This is all well and good as long as the focus is on the yokes purpose. To keep the bearer of the yoke in the path. The yoke keeps the oxen or the horse from veering left or right when pulling the plow. The yoke aids in making clean furrows and keeping the pathway straight. Keep that image in mind, we will be returning to it later.

Have any of you ever steered a plow blade? Or do remember your first time running a rototiller? I do. It wasn't fun. It was a mess. We live near enough Amish Country, and I grew up in Amish Country. You can tell when the horse was not harnessed properly, or the plowman is really a plowboy, his first time at the reigns. You can tell when the yoke is ill fitting. The field looks awful. The furrows are all over the place, different angles, different depths.

Some choose to take on the wrong yoke, one that does not fit properly. There are others in the world who find cause to force others to wear the wrong yoke. This is a yoke of Oppression. This is a yoke of Injustice. This is a yoke used to keep others down. Furrows drawn by this yolk are not smooth or straight, they are rough and forced. They do not allow seeds to take root. They do not produce good fruit. This is Jesus condemnation of some of the Pharisees who place strict rules and extra practice upon people.

Sometimes we do this to ourselves, moving beyond the ways of love and grace and peace and justice and focusing on the praxis and pieces. We think that we must light just the right candles. Or we must say just the right prayers. We fall into the temptation of thinking that when we get the Liturgy just right then God will bless us. Trust me, this is coming from a self confessed liturgy nerd, but it is none the less dangerous for me. This kind of thinking is short-sided. The form and function of the liturgy was developed from the ancient church as a means to lift us in body, mind, and spirit to a different plane, into a heavenly realm. Our practice of worship in community is meant by God to edify the hearts of man, so too with the teachings of God in the Law. Saying certain prayers and burning the incense and lighting a candle may do that for you, I know it often does for me. It only becomes dangerous when it usurps our community and relationship through the love of God.

Sometimes we put on the yoke of self blame, of not being able to forgive ourselves, even when we have been assured of God's forgiveness. How often do we doubt our own faith, our own deeds, our own purpose? This does only to hinder our growth and ruin our fruit. We place limitations on ourselves which keep us from receiving the blessing God has for us and in turn holds us back from fully living into our purpose --- to be a breathing manifestation of the Body of Christ in the world and to be a blessing to others.

So what is Jesus offering?

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden . . . ”

Come to me, you who are oppressed; you who are beaten down; you who struggle under the ways of man. Come to me, you who are wearied; you who are weighed down with self doubt and unforgiveness; you who struggle under the weight of an ill-fitting yoke.

“I will give you rest . . . ”

I will assure you of forgiveness. I will show you the love I have formed around you. I will open the world to you in the body of Christ. I will lift you up in blessing so that you may go out and bless the world.

Now to that yoke, the one Jesus offers.

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

The yoke that Jesus offers is one he knows well. By becoming a man himself, our God took on everything that we do. He knew hunger, frustration, homelessness, --- loneliness, rejection, and betrayal, ---- temptation, doubt, and even death. He knows the yoke. He knows every grain of the wood, every stitch of the leather, every twist of the rope. He knows the weight and breadth and type of yoke we are capable of bearing. The yoke that he offers us is made for us. It fits properly, it is light, it holds easy on our shoulders. If we allow him, he will become the plowman. *Gentle and Lowly in Heart*. He will adjust the reins in love. He teaches us, gently holding direction.

But what does it take for the beast to truly follow the ploughman --- to become one with him at the ropes? it takes time. It takes practice. It takes familiarity. We must spend time with Jesus. We must spend time in his word. We must spend time in the community of the body of Christ. This is how we know his voice. This is how we know his touch. This is how our hearts become one with his beating in tandem.

Only then do we find rest in the work. This is something that Worship in community does for us. We find comfort in the familiar. In praying and singing, in worshipping in spirit and in truth with a law that is written on our heart. When we take on this yoke we give control over to God.

By giving up control and turning our lives over to love we come under that release and find comfort. We now move *with* God. We now follow his lead --- follow his path. The furrows become straight the Earth becomes rich. The seeds take root and the fruits produce abundance. From those fruits we are made a blessing to the world.

Under the Yoke of Christ we give up control, we find comfort, we follow the path, and we find rest in this confidence gained through our obedient service to God and His Church.

AMEN

