

Sermon July 6, 2008

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## SHARING THE YOKE

(Matthew 11:28-30)

As I mentioned last week, we continue again this week with a series of lessons from Matthew's gospel in which Jesus teaches us something about being His disciple. There has been an emphasis in past gospel readings on the many costs and the burdens. Jesus has made it clear that being one of his followers will not always be easy, certainly not a walk in the park. He has said things like, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves (Matt. 10:16)," and "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword (Matt. 10:34)," after which Jesus tells those who would be his disciples that there will be divisions within families: between Father and Son, Mother/Daughter, Mother-in-law/Daughter-in-law. And then he adds, "Who ever does not take up his cross and follow me, is not worthy of me (Matt. 10:38)."

The call to being a disciple is not easy. But in today's text, the emphasis shifts somewhat – the call to follow Jesus instead of being a challenge becomes a gracious invitation, an invitation to bring him our burdens, our weariness, and to accept his gift of rest. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (Matt 11:28)."

Have you ever felt in dire need of rest? Physical or Spiritual? I suspect all of us have at one time or another found ourselves crying out "But I'm overwhelmed! There's too much to do, I just don't have enough time." Or, "I don't think I can handle any more crises in my life." And the referent for "crises" can be anything from something that's going on in one's family, to things happening in one's personal health, or something occurring on the job front.

How often do we feel absolutely stressed in our particular culture because of the issue of time? Wayne Muller in his book *The Sabbath* observes that, in his work, whether he has been visiting the very rich, the very poor, or the very middle class, he has continually heard the refrain "I am so busy." He comments that some of us wear our overwork and our exhaustion almost like a trophy. He then adds that there is a Chinese pictograph for the word "Busy." The pictograph is composed of two Chinese characters: one is the Chinese character for "heart;" the other is the character for "killing." In other words, to be busy is to be "Heart Killing." Those who have experienced the stress that comes from busyness, know how wise the Chinese are. Busyness, indeed, can be an addiction as assuredly as alcohol or drugs, and it's just as deadly.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacobson, Diane. *New Proclamation, Year A, 2002* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis) 121.

At the end of this month, the St. James' book club will be studying the book *The Last Lecture* by Randy Pausch. It's actually based on a lecture given by Dr. Pausch, who is a professor at Carnegie Mellon University. In September of 2006, Pausch was diagnosed at a very young age—he was in his early forties—with pancreatic cancer. Last August, his doctors projected that he might have “three to six months of good health,” and so he delivered this, his last lecture, in response to that. This particular lecture is actually focused on how to reach and go about reaching one's dreams. But in a recent article in *Newsweek* magazine, Pausch said, “The talk that I am actually the most proud of is the talk I've given over the years on time management.” And then he added: “At this point, I'm an authority on what to do with limited time.”<sup>2</sup> His lecture on time management can be viewed on the web at youtube.com. It's free and I commend it to you. In this lecture, Pausch points out, that most of us feel a “time famine.” There just doesn't seem to be enough of it. But then he adds that “time is the only commodity that really matters.”

Pausch goes on to speak to the reality that time is a gift that needs to be managed. He delivers an incredibly pragmatic and down-to-earth lecture about how to manage time. Pausch is but one among many who are trying to teach time management because so many of us have such trouble in managing our time. Pausch even adds that most Americans are much better at managing their money than they are at managing their time.

So if you feel overwhelmed, or too busy, Jesus' words today should cause us to stop, sit back, and reflect. But in today's gospel, Jesus is addressing far more than our modern inability to manage time well. He invites us: “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 in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30).”

It's interesting that Jesus uses a “yoke” as his metaphor of choice. Though not a particularly familiar to those of us who have grown up in modern American cities or suburbs, we've all seen pictures of yokes. We're probably all aware that a yoke was laid across the shoulders of two animals and connected them to the plow. In some culture's, yokes were used by a single individual, laid upon their shoulders in order to make some work easier to do. For example, it is easier to carry 2 buckets of water hanging off the two ends of a yoke than to pick up the buckets with one's hands. The whole purpose of the yoke is to better utilize the power of the one wearing it to accomplish the work or mission at hand. A well-made yoke makes the work easier to accomplish.

One biblical commentator has pointed out that the Greek word translated in today's gospel as *easy* (“for my yoke is easy”) actually means *kind*. “My yoke is *kind*.” “A good yoke is one that is carefully shaped so that there will be a minimum of chafing. Jesus' yoke will be ‘kind’ to our shoulders, enabling us to carry the load more easily.”<sup>3</sup> Please

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<sup>2</sup> His Better ‘Last Lecture’, *Newsweek* (May 26, 2008) 12.

<sup>3</sup> Hare, Douglas R.A. *Matthew: Interpretation – a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press: Louisville, 1993) 129.

note: a yoke doesn't mean a hammock; it's not something that's designed to give us rest and relaxation. A yoke is designed to help us actually accomplish whatever work we have to do more easily. It's makes hard work more comfortable. And the hard work is made even lighter, if two are yoked together. The joining of two oxen by a yoke to a plow helps the oxen become a team so that they can work together more effectively. So when Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you," he may be implying that he is trying to join himself to us as a team, that he himself wears the yoke. Maybe Jesus is saying to us, "Become my yoke-mate. Learn how to pull the load by working beside me and watching how I do it. The heavy labor will seem lighter when you allow me to help you with it." Taking on the yoke is not a means of avoiding work, but it is a way of dealing with it in a better way.

Yet, how many of us are either too proud to lay down the heavy loads or burdens we carry, or too scared to accept Jesus' offer to share the yoke with us?

There's a story<sup>4</sup> told about an event that happened in the Philippines, where a man observed that there was a driver of a caribou wagon. The driver overtook an old man who was carrying a very heavy load upon his shoulders. Having compassion on him, the driver invited the old man to ride in the wagon for free. The old man gratefully accepted the offer. He got into the wagon and held to the hand railing. After a few minutes, the driver turned to see how the old man was doing, and to his surprise, saw him standing and still straining under the weight of the load on his shoulders. He hadn't taken the burden off his shoulders. He was still wearing it. The old man explained: "I knew you would carry me. But I did not know that you would also carry my burden."

How often do we Christians carry many unnecessary burdens in the same way? We come to Jesus, we pray, we ask him for his help. We want to join and be yoked to him, and then we proceed to carry the burdens anyway. Perhaps we fear what might happen if we actually put the burden down or allow Jesus to carry it with us. Perhaps we falsely believe that the burden we carry is really our cross to bear in following Christ.

Now I admit that it can sometimes be quite difficult to discern the difference between a burden we can lay down and a cross that we are called to pick up. That's something we all need to reflect upon. When is it a cross to pick up with Christ? When is it a burden to lay down?

There is a story<sup>5</sup> that comes from the American Revolutionary War. It's certainly appropriate on this the Fourth of July weekend as we celebrate the founding of our country. As preparations were being made for a battle during the Revolutionary War, a corporal was seen to arrogantly be standing by ordering his men to lift a heavy beam that needed to be moved. A man in civilian clothes was walking by, and he watched the effort of the soldiers for a while, along with the corporal standing by the side giving

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<sup>4</sup> Transcribed from two stories found on SermonCentral.com.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, Herb. *Actions Speak Louder Than Verbs*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989) p. 121. Illustration found on SermonCentral.com.

orders. Finally he went over to the corporal and said, “Why don’t you help them bear that burden?”

“Sir,” the corporal replied indignantly. “I am corporal.”

The man in civilian clothes apologized for his misperception. But then he stripped off his own coat and joined the soldiers, lending his own efforts to the heavy beam. When the job was finished, the man went back and said to the corporal, “Corporal, the next time your men need help. Call on your commander-in-chief. I’ll be glad to help.” And with that, General George Washington put on his own coat and continued on his walk down the road.

If we are truly honest with ourselves we might have to admit that sometimes we are much like that corporal: more willing to stand on the sidelines than to yoke ourselves to others in order to get the job done. How often do we say, “Let George do it”? George Washington emulates what Jesus himself is offering to us – to yoke himself to us in the ministries to which he calls us.

Jesus offers us an invitation in today’s gospel to bring our burdens—and he offers to share them with us, to yoke with us in those burdens—but he doesn’t remove the workload from us. He does promise to help us with it. Resting and laying down our burdens doesn’t mean we stand aside like that Corporal and do nothing. Jesus’ invitation is an invitation to work. But invitations ask for our presence and our participation. Invitations demand a reply—an RSVP. Yet accepting this invitation to be yoked with Jesus gives us the inner strength we need not only to live fully with all of life’s joys and struggles, it also gives us the ability to accomplish the ministry to which Jesus has called each and every one of us.

“Come to me, all ye who are burdened and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. For my yoke is kind and my burden is light.”

Amen.