

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 9 July 2023
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A – Lectionary 14

1st Reading: *Zechariaiah 9:9-12*

Psalm: *145:8-14*

2nd Reading: *Romans 7:15-25a*

Gospel: *Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✠ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My father was born back in 1910 on the farm where he lived his entire life, and of course, therefore, where I grew up. He graduated from high school in 1928, then went to college for two years. But then he went back to the farm for four more years in order to let his younger brother, my Uncle Al, to go to college and graduate. Only then did my father return for two more years, so he graduated from Luther College in 1936. And then he spent the entire rest of his life as a farmer until his death in 1980.

He was a quiet man and didn't talk very much. And after he died I regreted that he hadn't told us many stories about growing up or about what life was like on our farm in the first half of the twentieth century. So I want to encourage all of you to tell stories to your children and grandchildren about your life before they came along. They will appreciate it in the long run, even if they don't seem entirely interested now.

Anyway, my father never talked to me about farming methods in the early years of his life. Did they use horses or other animals, or did they already have those new-fangled tractors even when he was a boy? I don't know. I wish I did.

I expect that some of you who grew up on farms may have had horses or other animals instead of tractors when you were young. Anybody have that? Good - pass those stories on!

And if you had working animals on your farm, then there were almost certainly times when you needed to have two of your animals yoked together. And even if you didn't, I'm sure we all have an idea about putting yokes on animals so that they could work as a team and be controlled. The yoke would be laid on their shoulders and would have weighed them down as they worked.

This idea of wearing a yoke as a symbol of a weight, a burden, a responsibility, is a common image in the Bible. Last week, as you may remember, we had a story about the prophet Jeremiah and the false prophet Hananiah, but we didn't read the whole story. If we had, we would have heard that Jeremiah had first appeared before the king of Judah wearing a wooden yoke, symbolising the burden Nebuchadnezzar would be placing on the king after he had conquered Jerusalem. But Hananiah had lifted Jeremiah's yoke off his shoulders and broken it, claiming that God would lift Nebuchadnezzar's burden from the king.

Well, the next time Jeremiah appeared before the king and Hananiah, he had replaced the wooden yoke with an iron one, which must have been quite a sight - Jeremiah struggling under the weight of an iron yoke. And as we discussed last week, Jeremiah's prediction about the burdens Nebuchadnezzar would inflict on the Judeans did indeed come true.

Now, in today's Gospel reading, Jesus makes reference to a yoke. He says: "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."

This is in sharp contrast to what Jesus says about the Pharisees in a different passage in Matthew: "Woe to you Pharisees, for you tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but you are not willing to lift a finger to move them yourselves." The Pharisees were known for making rule after rule about how people should live, down to exact details about how they needed to wash their hands before eating. And if the people didn't follow the rules to the tiniest detail, then God would not accept them.

And unfortunately, this is the way many people feel about the church - it's all about following the right rules - that is, the rules that *our* church has decided are the right ones - and if you don't follow them exactly, then you will be damned forever.

And yes, Jesus does say that there are rules, and that it is a very good thing to follow them, but we don't follow them just for the sake of following rules - they are there to help to know how to love God and love our neighbours - because those are the only real rules - love God and love your neighbour. And, of course, those rules aren't always easy to follow, but they are simple rules, and the Holy Spirit helps us to follow them.

And, of course, it is Jesus himself who carries the weight of our burdens - the weight of our sins, the weight of our sorrows, the weight of our despair. The yoke that we feel pressing down on us, he has lifted. But unlike Hananiah, he hasn't just broken the yoke and pretended that there is no burden. Instead, Jesus has taken our yoke and placed it on himself. When we think of the image of Jesus carrying his cross - and it was probably the cross-piece that he actually carried, placed on his shoulders very much like a physical yoke, weighing him down physically and spiritually - we know that he did that for each one of us.

I know I have recommended Franco Zeffirelli's film *Jesus of Nazareth* to you before, and the way he portrays Jesus carrying his cross in that film really does convey this idea in a vivid and dramatic way.

So Jesus is telling us in this passage to come to him and he will take *our* yoke, the thing that is weighing us down, onto himself, and instead he gives us *his* yoke, which is easy to bear, and *his* burden, which is light.

So whatever your particular burden is that is weighing you down - the weight of your sins, your sense of guilt, the weight of mistakes you have made, or your failures; feelings of inadequacy, a sense of being abused or oppressed in some way, your doubts, your sorrows, your depression; the weight of worry about your loved ones, conflicts in your families, grief over a loss, financial burdens, medical conditions, lost hopes, loneliness or despair - Come to Jesus, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and he will give you rest. Take his yoke upon you, and learn from him; for he is gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. The yoke he places on you is easy, and the burden he gives you to carry is light.

And it is easy to come to him. We meet him in the words of the Scriptures and in the bread and wine of communion. We see him in the beauty of his creation and in art. We hear him in music and in the still small voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to us. We feel him present with us whenever we stop and say a little prayer. He is always right beside us to take our burdens and give us peace.

Amen!

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