

Take My Yoke
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Third Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

I was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in August of 1989. The service was held in the cavernous, modern chapel on the campus of the College of Wooster in Ohio. I had joined the campus congregation, served on its Session and went through the ordination process there. Like many things, in retrospect, I had no earthly idea what I was getting myself into!

Presbyterian ordinations are fairly prescribed affairs. There is an ordination commission, made up of ministers and elders. There were representatives from several of the congregations I or my family had been connected to. My father served on the commission.

Ordinations tend to be wordy affairs. Along with a sermon and lengthy ordination liturgy, there are what we call “charges,” which are in fact mini-sermons, and often not so mini.

Sometimes there is a sermon and two charges – one to the new minister and one to the new congregation. In my ordination, since the new congregation was off in Chicago, we got away simply with a charge to the new minister.

I will, I hope, always remember that charge. It was offered by a minister named William Briggs, who had served with my dad as the minister for community outreach in our church in Zanesville. Bill Briggs was the first exposure I really had as a kid to a vision of the church’s mission beyond its walls. In this case, his ministry was extensively with the Appalachian poor who dwelled throughout southeastern Ohio. Bill Briggs worked hard at an important task, dismantling the boundaries between those with means and those without in that very economically diverse community. He remains a kind of iconic role model for me.

I don’t remember specifically what Bill Briggs said in his charge – I have no real illusions that words from a pulpit have a long shelf life! But I do remember what he gave me – this. A yoke, a replica, hand-made yoke. It has resided within my sightline and my consciousness ever since.

His reference was to this morning’s gospel reading, whereby Jesus says many important things about what it means to follow him, to live life differently because you are a disciple of Jesus. The assigned text from Matthew’s gospel is actually two texts, with some middle verses edited out. Jesus first praises John the Baptist to the crowds, lifting up John’s exemplary faithfulness. He is critical of the generation, the culture, that has rejected both John and Jesus.

Then Jesus makes another counter-cultural affirmation, that God has hidden the really Godly things from the rich and powerful and self-impressed, and revealed God's graciousness to those Jesus calls "infants," those at the periphery of culture and power. This is intended, of course, not only to comfort those who are following him, but to provoke those whose very legitimacy Jesus threatens – those in religious and political power.

And then this pivot, to words that are iconic, powerful, comforting, provocative and certainly at their essence an understanding of what it means to live as a follower of Jesus.

"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."

How extraordinary.

A reflection from the Taizé community shares that "In a sense, we are all weary and overburdened. In our depths lies hidden a poverty which, because it frightens us, oppresses us and drags us down... Christ welcomes us in our vulnerability and does not seem to be afraid of it. 'Come to me,' he says... Jesus seems to want to teach us to offer this inner poverty to God. Accepting our inadequacies, Christ takes upon himself what hurts us in ourselves."

Jesus offers an entirely different yoke, a yoke that is "easy," our translation suggests, but which could as easily be translated "kind," or "gentle." Jesus takes on our burdens, and bears them for us.

Biblical scholar Elisabeth Johnson writes: "The yoke was a familiar symbol of burden bearing, oppression, and subjugation. Yokes were laid on the necks and shoulders of oxen and also on prisoners of war and slaves." According to Johnson, "to all those laboring under harsh religious and political systems, Jesus says, 'Come to me... and I will give you rest.' In promising 'rest,' Jesus promises life under God's reign in the new world that he is bringing into being."

Over the course of its history, and certainly in this present moment, Christian faith can be understood as a set of restrictive principles and constrictive behaviors. From the very start, though, Jesus offers faith that is different. Faith is not a burden, or at least it shouldn't be. Discipleship, being a follower of Jesus, joined with other followers, is not a burden.

We all wear yokes. Sometimes we are aware. Sometimes we are not. Sometimes we choose. Sometimes we don't. The yoke Jesus imagines provides direction, to be sure, and guidance. But not control. The wrong yoke – the yoke of harmful behavior, or the yoke of power – will control us, and lead us in the wrong direction. This is different, a different yoke for a different direction. We chafe at the thought, because we want nothing, no one, to direct us, to steer us. But we also know better, that we

need guidance, and direction.

Sometimes faith is portrayed as burden, but it is not. It is reorientation that provides lightness.

Elisabeth Johnson asks: “What is the yoke Jesus offers?..(I)t is his teaching, his way of discipleship, which is not burdensome but life-giving. He invites the weary to learn from him, for he is not a tyrant who lords it over his disciples, but is ‘gentle and humble in heart.’ To take his yoke upon oneself is to be yoked to the one in whom God's kingdom of justice, mercy, and compassion is breaking into this world, and to find the rest for which the soul longs.”

Of course, there is an ethical dimension to all of this, a moral trajectory that unfolds in several directions. One is to those who create the burdens, the political and religious authorities. Jesus challenges them at every turn, including here by insisting that the burdens they create will not have ultimate power. But in the meantime, they do oppress, and so we who know the lightness of wearing Jesus’ yoke are therefore called to the work of easing others’ burdens, those who face poverty or racism or sexism or oppression and ostracism of any kind, in the church and in the world.

From the Taize community: “Not only is God unafraid of our poverty, but in addition he invites us to undertake with him the great work he is accomplishing in the world: to liberate by bearing the burdens of others, especially the self-imposed burdens that are sometimes borne out of self-contempt...we are called...to divest ourselves of our own worries and to accept Christ’s concerns in their place, to take upon ourselves a burden that, paradoxically, lightens our load...(We) offer our shoulders so that human beings are no longer victims of themselves.” Or others.

There is paradox in all of this, of course, a concept with which we don’t live comfortably. We are called to let go of so many things in order to take this one thing on, and a yoke, of all things, with all its symbolic significance.

Charles Cousar writes that this image is a call to discipleship, not obedience to a code, but loyalty to a leader.

Elisabeth Johnson puts it this way: “It is not that Jesus invites us to a life of ease. Following him will be full of risks and challenges, as he has made abundantly clear. He calls us to a life of humble service, but it is a life of freedom and joy instead of slavery. It is life yoked to Jesus under God's gracious and merciful reign, free from the burden of sin and the need to prove oneself, free to rest deeply and securely in God's grace.”

That is what William Briggs meant when he gave me this yoke all those years ago.

That is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant when he wrote about the “power” we receive when we let Jesus’ yoke rest upon us.

That is what the nineteenth century spiritual writer Christina Rossetti understood when she wrote this beautiful prayer: “O

Lord, Jesus Christ, who art as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land, who beholdest thy weak creatures weary of labor, weary of pleasure, weary of hope deferred, weary of self; in thine abundant compassion, and fellow feeling with us, and unutterable tenderness, bring us, we pray thee, unto thy rest.” May our burdens, and those of every burdened stranger and friend, be easy and light, and may we know the true and full rest of Jesus. Amen.