

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

July 9, 2023 (Year A)
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Jesus 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 my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

This is one of Jesus' most familiar and beloved sayings. But sometimes his words become so familiar that we don't take the time to stop and THINK about them. Yes, these are words of great comfort, but Jesus is saying MORE here than you might think.

Brenda was a young woman who was invited to go rock climbing with some friends. Although she was scared to death, she went with her group to a tremendous granite cliff. In spite of her fear, she put on the gear, took a hold of the rope, and started up the face of the rock.

She got to a ledge where she could take a breather. But as she was hanging on there, the safety rope snapped against Brenda's eye and knocked out her contact lens.

Well, there she was, far from home, on a rock ledge, with hundreds of feet below her and hundreds of feet above her, and she could barely see. Of course, she looked and looked, hoping it had landed on the ledge, but it just wasn't there. She was desperate, so she prayed to the Lord to help her to find it.

Eventually she did get to the top, and a friend examined her eye and her clothing for the lens, but there was no contact lens to be found. She sat down, despondent, waiting for the rest of her party to make it up the face of the cliff.

Finally, they walked down the trail to the bottom. At the bottom there was a new party of climbers just starting up the face of the cliff. One of them shouted out, "Hey! Anybody lose a contact lens?"

Well, that would be startling enough, but do you know why the climber saw it? An ant was moving slowly across the face of the rock, carrying it. It was Brenda's contact.

Brenda's father is a cartoonist. When she told him the incredible story of the ant, the prayer, and the contact lens, he drew a picture of an ant lugging that contact with these words:

(show picture)

"Lord, I don't know why You want me to carry this thing. I can't eat it. But if this is what You want me to do, I'll carry it for You."

I think it would probably do a lot of us some good to occasionally say, "God, I don't know why you want me to carry this load. I can see no good in it. But, if you want me to carry it, I will."

I love that story, but there is one thing missing in that cartoon. Jesus said, "Come to me all you that are carrying heavy burdens." We are ALREADY carrying burdens. That always kind of bothered me about these words from Jesus. We are weighed down and burdened and he asks us to take on more – his yoke. It doesn't seem fair.

I remember doing a funeral for someone who I was grieving for myself. And this was the text for the sermon. And I thought, "Lord, I'm already carrying the weight of grief here, and you're asking me take on more?"

But then I remembered something my grandfather told me. Some of you may have heard the name Denton before I came here. My grandpa and uncle were well known in the area for their draft horses and hay rides and sleigh rides. My grandpa had a team of huge Belgians. He could have pulled a wagon with just one of them, but he always teamed them TOGETHER. The "yoke" they wore may have been a burden, but it was SHARED by TWO horses, and that meant EACH horse only had to pull HALF of the load. The yoke LIFTED the burden.

And my grandpa always paired a YOUNGER horse with an OLDER one. The younger horses FOUGHT the harness and didn't LIKE to go where the driver WANTED them to go, but that older horse knew the way. He HELD the younger horse in line, and he CALMED him.

Life isn't meant to be a burden; it's meant to be a gift. God has a purpose for us. Even Adam, in the perfection of the garden of Eden, was PUT there to tend it and keep it. Before the forbidden fruit, he ENJOYED the work. It suited him. Luther called it a "vocation" – BEING the person we were meant to be, and doing the things God created us to do. That's how creation was SUPPOSED to be.

And that's part of Jesus' PROMISE here. The promise of rest and the lifting of our burdens isn't only for the END of our lives; it's also a promise for the LIVING of our lives – REALLY living.

Jesus says his yoke is easy, and his burden is light, but "easy" doesn't mean "not work; the word we TRANSLATE as "easy" LITERALLY means "better, for a purpose, useful." It can also mean "kinder," even "pleasant." The yoke that Jesus offers is better, meaningful. Christ's yoke fits us better. It suits us.

There's a wonderful legend about Jesus, about what he did in the quiet years before his ministry began. It's said that Jesus was a carpenter, just like his father. The legend claims that Jesus the carpenter was one of the master yoke-makers in the Nazareth area. People came from miles around for a hand-carved yoke, crafted by Jesus, the son of Joseph.

When customers arrived with their team of oxen, Jesus would spend considerable time measuring the team: their height, their width, the space between them, and the size of their shoulders. Then, within a week, the team would be brought back, and he would carefully place the newly made yoke over their shoulders, watching for rough places, smoothing out the edges, and fitting them PERFECTLY to THIS PARTICULAR team of oxen.

That's the kind of yoke Jesus invites US to take. The yoke, that brings rest to our weary souls, is tailor-made, crafted exactly to fit OUR lives, and OUR HEARTS. The yoke he invites us to wear fits us well, and doesn't wear on us, or make our spirits ache.

And it's designed for two. His yokes were always designed for two. Our yoke-partner is none other than Christ himself. The heavy burden seems lighter when we allow Christ to HELP us with it.

One of the great Biblical truths seems like a contradiction: True freedom and independence doesn't come from doing things ourselves, on our own; it comes from being YOKED with Christ. On our own, we can do nothing. HIS yoke is easy, and his burden is light – FOR US – because HE'S pulling the weight WITH us. We can never be truly free, to BE what we are created to be, to do what God asks us to do, until we ask Jesus for HELP, until we lay OUR burden on HIS shoulders.

The yoke Jesus invites us to take, the yoke that brings rest to our weary souls, isn't one that Jesus IMPOSES on us, but one HE HIMSELF WEARS! The yoke of purpose and contentment is a yoke for two, and it fits us perfectly. We were MADE for this, for THIS PARTICULARLY CALLING. Peace and contentment doesn't come from doing nothing; it comes from doing the work God CALLS us to do, the work we were MADE to do.

When we walk WITH Jesus, we learn what PURPOSE REALLY MEANS – the yoke is easy and the burden is light, because GOD gives it to us, and because WE CHOOSE it, and because JESUS walks ALONG-SIDE us, bearing it WITH us. Amen.