

“An Easy Yoke”

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[Psalm 145:8-14 and Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30](#)

There's a famous line which says “You can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time.” Perhaps this is what Jesus was talking about at the beginning of this week's Gospel lesson. As *The Message* paraphrase puts it, “For John the Baptist doesn't even drink wine and often goes without food, and you say, ‘He's crazy.’ And I, the Messiah, feast and drink, and you complain that I am ‘a glutton and a drinking man, and hang around with the worst sort of sinners!’” In other words, you just can't please people! It reminds me of something I saw recently on Facebook. It is called “The Perfect Worship Service” and it says it is the result of careful listening to the musical desires of those who attend a particular, *fictional*, congregation. It includes tips such as “More of those wonderful, lovely old hymns and less of those stupid, dead old hymns,” “More of those lovely arrangements with extra instruments and less of those showy arrangements with all those instruments,” and “Songs to be sung in higher and lower keys.” I'm sure that Joe will get right on meeting those musical requests!

The truth is that pretty much no matter what we do, someone will take issue with it. Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist were, in some ways, wildly different from each other. People complained about what John did and then when Jesus happened to do the opposite, people complained about that, as well. Jesus knew that the opinion of others wasn't the most important thing. The opinion of God is. In fact, Jesus says that the important things are hidden from the wise and intelligent, but revealed to infants. Basically, those who just *knew* they had all of the answers were on the wrong track entirely. Quite often, that's the case even today. Since they just *knew* they had all of the answers, they were opposed to what both John the Baptist *and* Jesus were about. Jesus tells those who would listen that he will reveal God to them. The Message paraphrase again captures this well: “No one knows the Son the way the Father does, nor the Father the way the Son does. But I'm not keeping it to myself; I'm ready to go over it line by line with anyone willing to listen.”

So, we listen, and we hear these gracious words of invitation: “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.” These are some of the most gentle and comforting words found in Holy Scripture. Who among us is not weary and carrying heavy

burdens? Who among us is not in need of rest? Our constant, on-the-go culture has us yearning for rest, and Jesus offers that rest to us.

But what's this about a yoke? That part does not sound very good! Jesus, I'll take the rest, but a yoke? No, thanks. For those like me who did not grow up around farm animals, a yoke is defined as "a wooden bar or frame by which two draft animals (such as oxen) are joined at the heads or necks for working together." Jesus says *his* yoke is easy, but it's *still* a yoke, right? Who wants to go around with a big wooden bar on our necks? That doesn't sound very comfortable, and this whole *yoked together* thing means that I won't be able to go off and do what *I* want to do. We just celebrated Independence Day last week. Independence – *that's* the American way. I want my freedom!



Instead, Jesus says "take my yoke upon you." I've got to walk around all of the time with the yoke of Jesus, which means I'm walking around *with* Jesus all of the time. Isn't Jesus supposed to show up when I call him and ask for something, kind of like a genie in a lamp? Hanging around all of the time? That'll cramp my style. No, thanks, I'll just show up here on Sunday and get my religion for the week in this one hour, and then I'm good. I'll take the rest, Jesus, but you can keep the yoke.

But this yoke, *Jesus'* yoke, isn't like any other yoke. Jesus tells us that his yoke is easy, and we might wonder about that. Those who take seriously the calling of Christ on their lives often find that it is anything but easy! Following in the footsteps of our Lord comes with challenges and persecution and misunderstandings, like Jesus mentioned at the beginning of today's passage. Easy? I don't think so. It turns out that the word translated as easy, *chrestos*, is better translated as "fit" or "useful" or "good." The yoke of Jesus is made just for us. It is fit to each of us. When a yoke is made for oxen, the oxen are brought to the carpenter who takes careful measurements of the neck of the oxen, the shape and contours, and then trims the wood to those measurements. A good yoke-maker would take the time to make sure the yoke was the right weight – not too heavy so as to add to the burden, but not too light as to break when used. It also needs to fit just right, so as to not rub the oxen's necks raw.

Jesus says, "My yoke is easy" – it fits you well. It's not too heavy; it won't rub, and it was made just for you. The yoke of Christ for each of us is our calling in life. God does indeed have work for us to do, but the work for each of us is what we were made for. There's a great line by Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." God's call for your life is not the same as it is for my life. It is designed just for you. Jesus has measured your life and trimmed your yoke just right for you, and you alone. Your call is where you

find deep gladness in meeting the deep hunger of the world. God's calling for you is God's plan for your life. It won't always be easy, but it will be fit to you.

And we remember that the yoke is made for two. The other person in that yoke with us is Jesus himself. Often, when a younger ox was needing to learn how to pull a plow, a more seasoned ox would be placed in the yoke with the younger ox. The younger ox would learn what to do by being yoked to the more seasoned ox. We are yoked with Christ himself, guiding us and leading us as we learn the steps of the life He has for each of us. One pastor said that when we begin to follow Jesus, we enroll in the School of Jesus and never graduate. We are life-long learners of the one who loves us and knows us better than any other. We are disciples of Jesus. The word "disciple" really means a student or learner. The disciples of Jesus are those who learn from Him our whole lives.

We come to Jesus for rest, but it is not always the rest that we might think of. Jesus said "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives." I think He might also have said the same about His rest. It is not as the world knows it. It is not vacation. It is *vocation*. Following the true calling on our lives will always be more rewarding, more fulfilling, more peaceful than following the call of the world. Will we get tired? Sure. But it will be much more often what we sometimes call "a *good* tired." You know that feeling when you've worked hard doing satisfying labor? It's a *good* tired when we respond in grace to the work we were made for. I read a line this past week from seminary professor Karoline Lewis. She writes: "Burnouts and breakdowns are not always the result of exhaustion -- they are symptoms of passions run dry and waning joy." I know this feeling well. Many of you know that my first degree was in technology. My first job out of college was at a big corporation and it was a very poor fit for me. Though the work itself was nowhere near exhausting, I burned out on that job very quickly. I left there to go to work in technology at a seminary – the seminary I later attended. My work there was much more demanding of my time and abilities than my first job. I remember, more than once, working on projects at 2 in the morning there. However, my work there was much more fulfilling. It was vocation. When we moved to Illinois, I first worked at the University. My work there was very good and I am thankful for the opportunity to have worked there. I enjoyed my colleagues and the tasks I did, as well as the University environment. But it was never fulfilling. I never was satisfied with what I was doing. My work here is again much more demanding of my time and abilities, but in what I do here, I find fulfillment. I find my deep gladness meeting the world's deep hunger.

Lance Pape puts it this way: "Soul-sick weariness is not the inevitable consequence of all work, but rather of work to which we are ill suited, of work extracted under compulsion and motivated by fear, or of work performed in the face of futility. There is also the weariness that comes from having nothing at all to do that truly matters. The easy yoke means having something to do: a purpose that demands your all and summons forth

your best. It means work that is motivated by a passionate desire to see God's kingdom realized. It means work toward a certain future in which all of God's dreams will finally come true. To accept the yoke of the gentle and humble Lord is to embrace the worthy task that puts the soul at ease."¹

Our world is fast-paced. It can be burdensome and grueling. We need to set down heavy burdens that were never ours to carry, so that we can take up the yoke of Christ.

I'll turn to The Message paraphrase again here. "I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." *Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. Live freely and lightly.* This is the rest to which our savior calls us. May we learn to lean into the rhythm of the life God has created for each of us, as we rest in the embrace of our savior. Amen

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3.*