



"Heavy Yoke, Light Burden"

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Mt. 11:16–19, 25–30 (NRSV)***

The context for today's worship service is our nation's celebration of Independence Day. The context for today's gospel, by contrast, was Jesus' national evangelism tour. Like certain politicians running for national office this time of year, Jesus was hitting all the major cities. Unlike our modern politicians, however, Jesus did not have a fancy tour bus to ride in, a Harley motorcycle club escort, or even a parade animal to ride on.

What he lacked in financial backing and celebrity status, Jesus made up for with the significance of his message and mission. Jesus invited listeners to share the yoke of ministry (11:28–30) with him—to end world hunger, to heal the sick, and to welcome strangers. Jesus' vision was profound, and his invitation compelling, but few onlookers responded to his call. "Why was that?" we may wonder. Did he have a bad marketing plan? Did he hire the wrong campaign manager?

Matthew's view is that things tended to go "south" for Jesus when his followers were taunted in public by bullies who intimidated those who lacked clarity about their values and who yearned for popularity more than righteousness. The success of Jesus' marketing campaign was further thwarted by those whose default mode for coping with life's burdens was to choose a solitary path, like characters played by John Wayne in 20th century westerns.

To compound matters, Jesus was batting "clean up" for a guy named John the Baptist, who preceded him in ministry, and who had been thrown in jail and was ultimately martyred for preaching a similar message (11:2).

A better campaign manager would have told Jesus to change his message and tone down the points that were ticking off his proponents, or head to another village and make sure that he only spent face time with people who were like-minded. But no, both men pressed on in their own unique, counter-culture ways.

In a society that determined identity and status by what, when, and with whom one ate, John and Jesus presented themselves to onlookers as *conspicuously unacceptable*.¹ John, a desert dweller and hermit, wore sackcloth and ashes and preached repentance and salvation. John was perhaps too grim and solitary to amass much of a following. Jesus, by contrast, seemed to have better communication skills, and more panache, but he messed with every Levitical code in the book, and was quickly labeled a heretic.

So John's and Jesus' invitations to share the yoke of ministry were largely rejected—not only because of the lifestyles that they lived—but because of the very nature of their messages. Jesus' message in particular was a complete affront to the ubiquitous religious message of the day—a message presented and enforced by the Pharisees.²

In the Pharisees' view, Israel was plagued by moral, economic, and political decay. The only way to restore the nation, in their view, was to get right with God; and the only way to get right with God was for every Jew to practice strict adherence to the Levitical codes, particularly those having to do with dietary laws, social interactions, and ritual practices.³

Jesus agreed that Israel needed to get right with God, but his approach was dramatically different than that of the Pharisees. Jesus argued that the way for Israel to get right with God was to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly. Jesus represented a small but vocal viewpoint grounded in the prophetic and Wisdom traditions of Ancient Israel.⁴

He identified himself as solidly within the Wisdom tradition by preaching a message of grace, compassion, and healing, and by challenging the legalistic, judgmental, and condemnatory messages of the Pharisees.

Jesus' association with the Wisdom school is further underscored when, in Matthew 11:19, he quotes the proverb, "Wisdom is known by her children."

As a proponent of Wisdom theology, Jesus preached and openly lived a message of grace, compassion, and healing. He described those who rejected him as persons from whom wisdom had been hidden (11:25), and he encouraged his adversaries to exchange the Pharisees' heavy yoke of Law for Wisdom's light yoke of grace.⁵

II

The yoke that Jesus offered was not light because it was permissive, but light because it was shared.⁶ The wisdom that is expressed in this symbol of the yoke is lost on many modern people who are unfamiliar with its use.

¹ Ibid., 355.

² Ibid., 353.

³ See Mortin Kelsey's *Psychology, Medicine and Christian Healing*.

⁴ Craddock, et al. 355.

⁵ Ibid., 355.

⁶ Ibid., 355.

Those who remember the “draft horse days” in this country, or those who have traveled to rural areas in the Third World, may understand better than others in our time the power of the yoke metaphor that Jesus employed.

Draft animals, as some know, are often yoked in pairs—especially when one in the pair is being trained for service by the other.

I was born long after the draft horse days, but I have seen several of my relatives demonstrate the use of draft animals over Independence Weekend and at county fairs, and I have seen farmers in places such as Indonesia and the Philippines use draft animals in modern times.

The grove and outbuildings on our family farm in Iowa were filled with remnants of the pioneer days when virtually all farm implements were powered by draft animals. These implements always generated a great deal of curiosity in me as a child. My sister and I used to play on them and pretend that we were pioneers. These experiences inspired my sister and me to bombard our parents and grandparents with endless questions about draft animals, antique farm equipment, and “the old days.”

I don’t remember all of their answers or all of their stories, but I do remember that the old people didn’t miss the draft horse days. I remember, for example, talking with John Schaap, an erstwhile member of our congregation, some years ago about how he (a man from Orange City, Iowa) ended up in the East Bay. John explained to me that after WWII he resettled in the Bay Area because he was tired of seeing the south side of a draft horse.

While none of the old timers longed for the draft horse days, many missed their draft animals who had become family pets. My father, for example, once told me that his father, August Nehring, owned a Clydesdale called “Jack” who pulled the implements that my grandparents used to farm their quarter-section in Buena Vista County. As Jack aged, he eventually became too old to work in the fields all day, so in the later years of his life, my grandfather bought another Clydesdale and switched from using a one-horse yoke with Jack to using a two-horse yoke with Jack and his successor. This change was made so that Jack would have an easier time in the fields, and so that he could train his replacement how to pull a single-bottom plow through the long and winding rows on our hilly farm. The yoke was heavy for the animals, but the burden was light, my father explained, because it was shared. *Heavy yoke, light burden.*

III

Even if we’re not familiar with old-time farming techniques, the song “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” comes to mind, too, as an everyday illustration of what we’ve inherited from our forebears. The first verse goes like this:

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear!

What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
Oh, what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer!

Christ's invitation to the ministry is not an invitation to go it alone. The Christian life does not come with a John Wayne script. Quite to the contrary, Christ's invitation is an invitation to allow him to share our burdens, and for us to help each other carry our respective loads.

Consider what you may be trying to carry alone today. Remember the words of that old-time hymn, and offer up to God the portion that you cannot and should not be carrying alone.

IV

In a similar vein, I was going through some files in my office this past week and came across a memorable photo that was sent to me by a former parishioner who is now chairman of his congregation's annual stewardship campaign. The photo is a picture of a barn raising—though not your typical barn raising.

A typical barn raising photo would have depicted the construction of a new barn, but not this one. The barn raising in the photo that I received depicts about fifty people literally lifting and carrying a barn several yards from one seemingly permanent location to another. The photo, I was told by the author of the letter in which it came, was taken outside of a small town in North Dakota.

The letter explained further that none of us would ever think that we could lift a barn—and we couldn't—by ourselves. But take one look at the barn raising picture that I received, and you will see—without a doubt—that fifty people not only lifted that barn, they carried it several yards to a new location. *Heavy yoke, light burden.*

This parishioner had found a tangible illustration for one of his church's annual stewardship campaigns. Financial challenges often daunt all of us, individually and collectively. Consider the cost of some large or expensive item, and we think to ourselves, "No, I/we could never afford that—whatever "that" is—and we couldn't, alone.

But consider how the women in Eastern Javanese villages deal with such challenges as wanting a nice set of dishes and cookware appropriately sized for preparing family wedding feasts and similar events. Rather than each woman trying to buy her own set of china and commercial cookware—which none of them would be able to afford and still pay their kids' school fees—the women of each neighborhood pool their resources and buy one set of cookware and one set of dishes that are shared amongst all of the contributors. *Heavy yoke, light burden.*

A similar approach could apply in terms of our church's financial challenges. Last Sunday, we adopted a church budget for next year that includes a \$16K deficit—\$42K if we include the draw from the Outreach Reserve Fund to support our new Compañeras/os Ministry venture. Not many of us could write a check to cover the entire deficit; but together, we could eliminate that deficit if we set our minds and hearts to do it, by each bearing the part that we are strong enough to carry. *Heavy yoke, light burden.*

Tomorrow we celebrate our nation's Independence Day—a day that some take to extremes—either as “ho-hum,” or as a celebration of U.S. imperialism. I suggest rather than one extreme or another, we affirm that when the U.S. has been at our best, at home or abroad, we have been a nation that has shared the yoke of leadership among our own people, and we have shared the yoke of leadership with other nations. When the yoke has become imbalanced—either as a government or as a people—we have let down others, or we have failed to affirm their agency by trying to carry the load for them. In the end, the well-being of weaker individuals or nations has not been effectively served and none of our futures has been enhanced. When, by contrast, the yoke is balanced by two or more governments or people, then the burden is lighter. *Heavy yoke, light burden.*

V

Through each of the examples that I've shared today, and many others that could be named, we can say “yes” to Christ's invitation to share the yoke of ministry—by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly.

This yoke is easy, Jesus promises, whether we are carrying burdens that are emotional, social, financial, or political, when the burden is shared.

As we celebrate our nation's independence this weekend, let us consider how God is still calling us to share the yoke of ministry—for the sake of the gospel, and the sake of all who long for freedom, equality, and justice—within and beyond the boundaries of our nation. Amen.