

"I am the vine, you are the branches; abide in me and you will bear much fruit." John 15:5

Vine & Branches

from St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church, 720 N. King Street, Honolulu, HI 96817 • Phone (808) 845-2112

Special Weekly

Edition
July 8, 2020

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Yokes

Welcome back to you here in the church, and a blessed good morning to you taking part by video!

It's been a long time that we've been apart, and I fear, an even longer time before we can all be together again.

So pardon my funny look, something between a wannabe welder and a dental hygienist, as we open our ears and our minds to the question that every Sunday asks: Is there a word from the Lord today? Hopefully, the answer is "yes!"

When the prophet Muhammed shares the last words he hears from God, he says this: "O humankind, we have created you from a single male and a single woman and formed you into tribes and nations so that you may get to know one another."

As Jesus prepares for his encounter with the cross, his final words to his friends are: "Love one another, as I have loved you." In the Jewish scriptures, it's Micah who reminds us: "What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?"

Hinduism, Buddhism, the Sikhs, the faiths of Indigenous Americans...all these have as their core creed the miracle of creation and the dignity of every human being, reflecting the desire of the One who holds all things together — that we care for, nurture, and love each other.

So why don't we? Why so much division, distrust, denial? Why do we see an old man at a Florida retirement community shouting that his neighbor is missing his KKK hood, and the neighbor responds with, "White Power!?"

Why the conflict over mask wearing during a pandemic? Why the centuries old refusal to accept the basic truth that Black lives matter?

That's what St. Paul is asking us to look at this morning. There he is, bemoaning our situation loud and clear: "I don't understand my own actions. For I don't do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."

And what we see is that the common thread running throughout Paul's angst this morning is: "I" "I" "I"!

It's when we get all wrapped up in "me" (instead of "we") that our problems begin. My ego is at the root of it. Protecting it. Safeguarding it.

Shining it up so I can display it like a peacock displays his feathers. Here lies the problem. Which isn't to say the ego is bad.

Our ego is supremely important — to a point. It's vital that every child develop an ego because it's part of who we are, but it is not the sum of who we are.

The ego is something like the shell the protects the seed within. Without the shell, the seed within doesn't have a chance to survive.

It's too fragile, too subject to the hard knocks of life. But the time comes when the seed needs to be planted. When the shell needs to be cracked open. To be let go.

And yes, to eventually wither away. That's where Jesus is coming from today as he talks to us about yokes.



The yoke he's talking about today is not the thing in the middle of an egg!

It's a piece of carved wood that's fitted over the shoulders of animals that plow fields.

Yokes guide the animals to keep them on a particular course. And Jesus knows full well that this world is chock full of yokes.

Just take a gander at our world! There's millions of 'em. Yokes of fame, fortune and power. We wear those yokes when we revel in our glory days of years gone by.

Then there's the yoke of material success. He who dies with the most toys, wins! That's a yoke you can wear right into the grave.

And don't forget the yokes of drug induced bliss and sexual addiction and "all you can eat" buffets.

Some of these yokes bring short-term pleasure, like eating a plate lunch from L & L Drive Inn - it tastes so good going down, but give it an hour or so...

Other yokes seem to bring a sense of immortality. Yokes like money in the bank or fixations on youth that demand plastic surgery and botox to get rid of wrinkles; wrinkles that once signified wisdom, but now signify nothing more than being obsolete.

In the end, none of these yokes truly satisfy, because all of these yokes are based on exactly what's got St. Paul all rattled this morning: The ego!

There must be a better way. And there is!

Let's reclaim the wisdom of every religious tradition and recognize that we are meant to love people and use things, not to use people and love things.

Let's pay attention to how we've reduced so much of religious wisdom into simply another way to inflate the ego.

"Yoga is meant to free oneself from oneself — now we use it to get loose.

Buddhist 'mindfulness' is to bring one to that place of "no self" — yet now it's a mere technique to feel more 'centered.'

The great self-emptying that we Christians call 'kenosis' — the pouring out of the self so that God's self may be poured into us, has seemingly disappeared from the scene, replaced with what some call a moralistic, therapeutic, deism." K. Armstrong, Scripture, 411, modified.

In plain English, we've reduced our faith to a god who is far away, who only cares that I'm following the rules of the current society, and who, if I'm lucky, might hold my hand when I'm scared of ghosts!

In these days of pandemic, economic depression and civil unrest, all people of faith are summoned to respond, to recapture the eternal truths of all the great faiths.

If a private, self-centered, me first, faith was ever a reasonable or responsible thing to have, it is no longer.

Our faith pushes us into the world, for the sake of the world. Karl Barth, perhaps the foremost theologian of the 20th century, says this: God is with the "threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, the widow and orphans and aliens..."

God stands unconditionally and passionately on this side, and on this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly.

Against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied and deprived of it." Barth, Church Dogmatics, III, 386. So what are we the privileged to do?

Put on the yoke. It's offered to everyone. Even to you, even to me. The yoke of Jesus calls out the best in us.

The kindest. The most generous. The most forgiving. Which, in the end, is not us at all, but the Spirit of God in which we live.

The Spirit that is able to breathe, as we let go. The Spirit that is able to work, as we surrender.

This yoke takes us into the path we are made for, fulfilling the dreams of God.

But know this too. If we accept this yoke, there is a cross waiting. Persecution is likely whenever you dance to the beat of the Living God.

And there's one more thing. Today, Jesus reminds us that the only one who knows the Father is the Son, and those to whom the Son reveals the Father.

In a different Gospel, the apostle Phillip challenges Jesus; the same challenge that you and I sometimes make too.

"Show us the Father," Phillip says, "and we will believe." So Jesus heals the sick.

"Show us the Father, and we will believe." So Jesus welcomes the poor.

"Show us the Father, and we will believe." So Jesus washes their feet.

"Show us the Father, and we will believe." So Jesus is nailed to the cross.

"Have you been with me all this time, and still don't recognize the Father?"

Such is the yoke of our Lord. Doing what Jesus does. Going where Jesus goes.

This is the yoke of the Lord.

Are you ready for yours?

+amen

Inch By Inch ...

By golly, how different things look in church these days! Our first day of reopening saw about 60 people come to the services, with most still attending on line. Since the 7:30 and 9:00 were pretty well evenly attended, and the 10:30 was not, we'll discontinue the 10:30 and continue on with 7:30 and 9 for the time being!!!!!!



Wednesday July 8
9:30 am Healing Service

Sunday July 12
7:30 am Mass in Church
9:00 am Mass in Church AND Online
11:45 am Chinese Mass
5:00 pm Tongan Vespers



For our ever patient ZOOM folks, we got a new microphone for the computer that should fix the sound problem from last week!!!!!! Thanks for your understanding!

Confessions of a racist mother

In January 1990, my husband and I decided to adopt another child. We had two children, a natural born daughter aged 12 years and an adopted son of 9 years. We had moved into a large 4 bedroom rectory and decided the empty bedroom needed to be filled with new life. And so we called Children's Home Society, the adoption agency we had worked with before, and began what we expected to be a long process.



On that first go at adoption, we had opted for a special needs child. This began a process of discerning what "special need" was and how severe. No, to a non-white child. Bill did not want the adopted status to be obvious at a casual glance. No, to blindness. As an artist, I could not imagine raising a child who could not see the beauty of creation. Maybe to deaf. Yes to medical problems if they were within our ability to manage financially and time wise—as if we could control any of it. Sooner than expected, we were gifted with a child with a complex of medical issues that, while demanding, we did more-or-less manage.

Now, back at the agency, we again opted for special needs, but this time not limited to medical but open to enduring issues such as blindness, and a non-white. How about bi-racial, black and white? Yes, we said. Wonderful, CHS replied, because there are only two other families in the state of California willing to adopt a black/white child into their family. Only two others in the whole state! I still find that stunning. But first, by state law, for 6 months the agency had to seek a family with a similar racial make-up; if one could not be found, then the child could be placed elsewhere. And so it happened: as quick as November 1990, we welcomed newborn Bennett, birthed from a white mother and black father, into our home. And what a blessing he has been.

We made attempts to honor Bennett's black heredity. He had books by black authors, beginning with Jack Ezra Keats classic *The Snowy Day* to Faith Ringgold's *Tar Beach* and later biographies, his favorites being on Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jimi Hendrix. We knew we could not provide Black culture, but we did take Bennett on a sabbatical to live in Kabale, Uganda when he was 7 years and I took him on a youth mission near Durban, South Africa when he was 14.

What we did not do was talk about race. Truth be told, I was afraid to bring it up for appearing racist and besides I didn't think it important. It was better to be "color-blind" wasn't it? Years later, in 2009, a guest at the Oakland Catholic Worker accused me of being racist. He didn't like how I looked at him. Michael, a co-worker, said, "barbara is cool; she is color-blind." "I don't want her to be color-blind," he retorted, "I want her to see me for who I am, a good, struggling black man."

In spite of our efforts, Bennett, a black child growing up in a white world, was "marked" as different. It began when he started school. He was an obviously bright child but the school wanted to put him into "special education." The battle against the school's belittlement of our son, without valid cause, continued to the point that I finally took him out of school and homeschooled him until we moved north to Montana, where we put him into Montessori. Realizing he needed to be kept safe, we kept him in private school through high school.

What I failed to understand at the time, and all the way to the present Black Lives Matter movement is it was all about the insidiousness of racism. He was a black child with white privilege. The kind, talented and good-humored adult he has become is a gift of that. But it would not be enough.

On more than one occasion, I sat down with Bennett and told him that he had to be more careful, more polite, more respectful, more helpful than his peers because he was "marked somehow" and if he did not exceed at being "perfect" he would be the one harassed, punished or arrested. He knew that from experience, but he asked me why, and here is my confession, I said "I don't know". And I didn't. I was clueless. I knew the reality of the racism that my son was suffering but I did not know or see that it was racism. I am glad I was not so blind that I did not see that he was treated differently and that I knew to keep him safe. It wasn't until the rise of Black Lives Matter that I realized that the "mark" on Bennett was the color of his skin.

Bennett thrived and is today a successful graphic artist. Love is the answer.

(Drawing: self-portrait by Bennett Baumgarten, 2015)