

The Yoke

Thank you all for coming this morning to worship. On these long holiday weekends, there is a lot of tugging for your time and attention.

Thank you for bringing yours here today.

As you know, we are beginning the long season of the year, between Pentecost, which we celebrated three weeks ago and Advent, which begins 4 weeks before Christmas.

Each year we follow the Revised Common Lectionary.

It is the three year cycle of readings that we share with most other denominations, and each year focuses on one of the three Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, with John making an entrance here and there.

This year, Matthew's Gospel teaches us.

Matthew, who gives us the Magi, the Sermon on the Mount, the reckless sower of seeds, and who today invites us to put on the yoke of Jesus, and in that submission, find peace.

That is a peek at where we are going in the weeks ahead, and I look forward to walking that road with you.

Today's gospel picks up in the middle of the story.

Let's set the stage.

Jesus has just finished a tour of the villages in his area.

He's cleaning out demons, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind.

And as he finishes, all the best people in town come by to say: "So what?!"

If this were a concert tour, it would be bankrupt.

All the best and the brightest, the priests and the businessmen, the mayor and the city council, all tell Jesus they are thoroughly unimpressed.

And then it gets worse.

John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, who, Luke tells us, leaps in the womb when Mary visits Elizabeth so long ago; even John doesn't know what to make of Jesus.

In the scene just before today's reading, John is locked up in Herod's Halawa Correctional Center.

In his dungeon, John hears stories of Jesus eating with riff raff, curing ailments, and even providing gobs of wine when a wedding feast runs out.

John, as you know so well, was not the partying type.

John, the guy waving God's axe around, ready to chop down the tree of unrighteousness, sends his disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you the one, or is someone else coming?"

Even John isn't getting it.

The disciples, as we know from our travels with Luke last year, struggle to understand just who this Jesus is, what he wants from us, where he is leading them, us.

You know this struggle; and I do too.

The husband and wife, sitting at the dining room table, trying to sort through what their marriage is and what they hope it can become.

Teenagers struggling to understand mom and dad's "outdated" rules.

Coming to grips with who we are to each other, picking up and putting down our own wants and needs for the better of the ones we love, these struggles are the stuff of life, no matter our age or circumstance.

In the midst of these struggles, Jesus takes a seat at the dining room table, he leans in, and listens.

In his letter to the Romans today, Paul stands with many of us: astonished that he can't do the good that he wants: finding himself looking both ways as he leaves a dark room on Kalakaua Avenue or hanging out in Vegas at the craps table blowing money he doesn't have or cheating his business partner or this or that, just name your poison.

What Paul knows, what we know, is that our own puny efforts won't save us; will power won't save us.

In Alcoholics Anonymous they say: "if you think will power keeps an alcoholic from drinking, try eat a box of Ex Lax and use will power not to use the toilet."

Change "alcohol" for your poison of choice, and it's the same story.

Paul knows he needs something more.

That something more is Jesus.

We know it too.

Where it gets muddled is, what does it mean?

If the people closest to Jesus don't get him; how can we?

Especially today.

Have you noticed how many Jesus brands are out there these days?

Each one claiming to have Jesus nicely packaged, neatly wrapped for my personal tastes, your personal needs.

There's that fast talker on channel 11 that promises if you send in your seed of \$1000, Jesus the banker will repay you many times over.

There's the Joel Olsteen smiley Jesus who wants you to have all the good things in life, like cars, houses and money.

If you want some spice in your life, grab the Left Behind series, where the apocalypse is right around the corner, and sign up to be raptured before Jesus the warrior destroys the planet.

Many on the political right claim one can be a faithful Christian while slashing assistance to the poor and the elderly, while many on the political left argue that faith itself is a sad joke for deluded people.

It's a real buffet line, isn't it?

No wonder so many just shake their heads and try whatever flavor of the week spiritual treat they might stumble over, or reject it all together.

Yet, it's not so much that Jesus is hard to understand, it's that what he offers is so hard to accept.

Particularly for those of us with means; with homes, with jobs, with money in the bank.

Maybe that's why we have all these one-dimensional Jesus' because the real thing asks us to accept too much.

One way to avoid the real Jesus is to wrap our faith in mom, country and apple pie.

That's what the Pharisees and Saducees did in Jesus' time. So did the Zealots.

This way, God looks just like us, instead of us changing to look more like God.

This weekend, as an Army officer put it, we celebrate "the most sacred holiday in American life."

He uses the word "sacred" quite intentionally.

"Sacred" means "holy," "blessed," "consecrated," "hallowed," "revered."

The holiday we celebrate is the American declaration of independence, which led to the American Revolution, which led to our successful defeat of the British, which led to the birth of a nation founded on hard work, free enterprise, individual achievement, rewarding success through financial gain, and punishing failure through bankruptcy and poverty.

You know, as lifelong Christians, even though it is hard to say it, you know how at odds many of our national values are with the values of Jesus.

It was Thomas Jefferson who said "I tremble for my country when i consider that God is just."

We promote and respect intelligence, sophistication, strength, and success.

As Ben Franklin loved to say: "God helps those who help themselves!"

So like husbands and wives finding a way through it at the dining room table, or teens struggling with their parents, we sit down with Jesus to learn a different way.

What can we learn?

At the end of his failed tour today, you would expect Jesus to be discouraged.

All that good work, all the healing, all the kindness, mocked and sneered at.

You expect he'll try something different.

But not Jesus.

Instead, he sings a most unlikely prayer, praying it in the midst of the utter failure of his efforts:

“I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes Father, for such was your gracious will.”

Put it more bluntly:

“Thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You’ve concealed your ways from sophisticates and know-it-alls, but spelled them out clearly to ordinary people. Yes Father, that’s the way you like to work.” The Message.

In the midst of swords and nuclear weapons, Jesus calls us close and whispers:

“Blessed are the gentle, the earth shall be theirs.”

In his world and ours, where cash is king and money talks, Jesus calls us close, and holding our hands in his, says:

“You can’t worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you’ll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can’t worship God and Money both.” Mt. 6:24, The Message.

And while none of this is hard to understand, it is all of it terribly hard to accept, for me, and perhaps for some of you.

Sitting with Jesus, at the dining room table, let’s lean in to hear about. . .

his preference for the outcasts, for the stupid, for the young, for the infirm; he paints it on every page of the gospels.

Karl Barth, perhaps the foremost theologian of the 20th century, says that always and everywhere God is with the “threatened innocent, the oppressed poor, widow, orphans and aliens...God always 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, II.1, 386.

So what are we, so many of us among the privileged, to do with this Jesus?

It is the yoke.

It is offered to all; even to you and me.

Even to the mayor who mocked Jesus; it's offered to every married couple, to every teenager, to every person.

The yoke of Jesus is easy; but easy in it's calling 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 are in tune with the Living God.

But with this yoke is also peace.

Today, Jesus lets us overhear how the only one who knows the Father is the Son, and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal the Father.

In a different Gospel, Phillip presents a challenge to Jesus; a challenge you and I sometimes make too.

"Show us the Father," Phillip said, "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?"

This is the yoke of our Lord, doing what Jesus does, with Jesus at our side.

This is the yoke of the Lord.

Are you ready for yours?

+amen