

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 that 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

