

The Yolk's on You

Matthew 11:28-30

“*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens.*” Have you ever noticed that the smallest words can carry the greatest meanings? Conjunctions are very small words, and they are the lowliest of words. They don’t even rate being capitalized when they are part of a song or title. They are placed in sentences for transitional purposes, to make reading smoother. They are connective by design. But, oh the weight they carry. For example, I just said “but.” When you say something and then immediately follow it with “but” there is going to be a change, a modification, a movement away from the original thought. Conjunctions like “if”, “or”, etc. can also have strong impacts on phrases when judiciously placed.

“*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens.*” The word Jesus used here was “and.” He didn’t say, ‘Come to me all you that are weary *or* carrying heavy burdens.’ He said “and”, and for good reason. You cannot carry a heavy burden and not be wearied by it. The two go hand-in-hand. A burden by definition is something you are carrying that is weighing you down. Such makes you tired, sometimes bone tired. It can consume your thoughts, your energy, and it can change who you are as a person. You can become irritable and people can begin to not want to be around you.

To be burdened is, at times, to seemingly have a mill stone hanging from your neck. Many burdens can be faced up to and with effort can be overcome. Until it is gone, we are still tired. Some burdens can never be removed, but only faced up to and lived with. In March 1992 I baptized a one-year old girl with Down’s syndrome. Her mother was a single parent. Everyone knew the burden she was facing in raising her child. After I baptize someone I take them into the congregation for a few moments, engaging the people in their responsibilities to support the newly baptized person and family. As I carried Mikayla in my arms slowly down the center aisle of the church there wasn’t a dry eye anywhere. To this day, it remains one of the most powerful baptisms I have ever done. Mikayla just turned twenty and still lives with her mother. Raising a Down’s syndrome child and caring for a Down’s syndrome adult is a burden you cannot remove, nor did Mikayla’s mother want to do so. But she had to learn how to find respite and peace with the life she was given with Mikayla. And she did so.

To use a different word, all of us are yoked to something. Most yokes are thought of as burdensome. To throw off a yoke can be an individual process; it can also be the work of many people acting in concert for a common cause.

In the early 17th century a group of people sought to throw off the yoke of religious oppression. They were called Pilgrims. In November 1620, a ship named *Mayflower* landed along the coast of New England with 102 souls on board. They were a mixture of Pilgrims along with artisans and workers recruited by the Pilgrims to help build a new land and a new life. Before landing, however, there was dissension between the Pilgrims and non-Pilgrims. A compact was forged and signed by 41 of those on board, outlining how the group would govern themselves, since they had no other government upon which to rely. The Compact begins with these words: “In the name of God, Amen.” They turned to God first, not last. Although the Mayflower Compact does not have a direct correlation to the Declaration of Independence, John Adams attributed to it an inspirational influence upon the drafters of our Declaration. Adams noted that following the signing of the Compact, the first democratic election in America was held, as the people freely elected a governor. God was relied upon and the yoke of religious oppression was removed.

Our Declaration of Independence, one of the most brilliant documents ever crafted, articulated throwing off the political oppression of Great Britain. The opening paragraph of the Declaration cites “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” as being foundational in the decision for America to separate from Great Britain. In the second paragraph we read that all are endowed by their Creator with the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The Declaration goes on with a long list of grievances against King George III and then it attests that the General Congress appeals to the “Supreme Judge of the world” to ensure the morality and righteousness of what they are doing

The language of both the Mayflower Compact and the Declaration of Independence remind us of an important truth – that in throwing off the yokes of both religious and political oppression, the framers of these foundational documents relied first and foremost on God to inspire, guide, and protect them. At the beginning of the First and Second Continental Congresses that met to draft the Declaration of Independence, it was voted that every session would begin with prayer.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens.” All of us are yoked to something burdensome. With these words, Jesus calls us to himself and then says he will give us rest. True rest from the burdens, the yokings of life, is a delicious and yearned for prospect. But then Jesus immediately adds, “Take my yoke upon you...” Yokes are heavy and we equate them with burdens. Yet Jesus wants us to put on yet another yoke. We need to be clear here. Jesus is not asking us to take *his* burdens onto ourselves thereby adding to our own. He is offering us the perfect way to deal with the burdens we have now. “Take my yoke upon you,” our Lord says and then he adds, “...and learn from me.” What are we to learn? The way of peace and grace and forgiveness and wholeness of life in him.

Jesus promises in verse 30, “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” An actual wooden yoke is associated most often with a brace of oxen. Tradition holds that as a young man working in Joseph’s carpentry shop, Jesus became known far and wide for making the very best oxen yokes. People would bring their team of oxen to the shop and Jesus would carefully measure the necks and chests of each one. He would then carefully hand-craft a yoke for the two oxen that would fit them perfectly. The oxen could pull their load without any chafing of their skin. The load was equally distributed across their bodies, allowing them to work as efficiently as possible.

Our Lord does not promise that by putting on his yoke, the mantle of his Lordship will automatically eradicate all our burdens. As with little Mikayla being raised by her mother, some burdens will always be with us. But Jesus does promise that by turning to him in our distresses, by praying to him, by yielding ourselves into his care, by giving our burdens to him, we will be given rest. And from rest comes renewed strength and determination to deal with our burdens, accepting with grace those we cannot be rid of, and being strengthened in resolve to rid ourselves of those we can.

Here’s the image I want you to hold onto. Jesus still creates perfect fitting yokes. When you turn your life and your burdens over to him, envision him hand-crafting a yoke just for you. He has carefully measured you, and the yoke he makes for you is easy to wear and it makes the burdens you bear lighter. Truly, the yoke’s on you. But wait, wait – the yoke is made for two, not one. Jesus is beside you with the other half of the yoke around his own neck. The burden with which you struggle is being borne by both you and the Lord together. And it lightens the load!

With what are you burdened? As with the Pilgrims and the members of the two Continental Congresses, who entrusted their burdens to God in Christ, each of us can also be truly free. *“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.”* To put it in the opening words of the Mayflower Compact: “In the name of God, Amen.”

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 3 July 2011
[Independence Sunday]