

The Church of the Good Shepherd
Lexington, Kentucky
Sermon for the Third Sunday After Pentecost
July 3, 2011
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In the 11th chapter of St. Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks some rather harsh words to those who had failed to discern the truth he had proclaimed. The proud, the sophisticated, and the wise had missed the point of his message in much the same way you and I have overlooked or disregarded the clues in a mystery story. So he says, "Father, Lord of heaven and earth, I thank you because you have shown to the unlearned what you have hidden from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants." It is not so much that these things were hidden, as it was that these people in their pride and false sense of security in their own intellectual achievements were blind to what was openly revealed to all who heard and saw Jesus.

It should be easy for us to understand how people failed to see what Jesus had revealed. It didn't make sense to them. What sense does it make to be told that we are to find happiness from being hungry and thirsty for the sake of righteousness? How absurd it is to say that we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us? Any intelligent person, any student of the laws of God, would recognize this to be the talk of a man who is not in his right mind. And if it weren't bad enough already, listen to the way in which he concludes his address: "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."

A yoke is a piece of wood fashioned to join two animals together for the purpose of bearing a heavy load, or to fit on the shoulders of a man or woman either to lift a burden or to bind them in slavery. The word of Jesus in this passage call to mind all of these meanings. And so what sort of man would tell an already tired and overburdened people to take on his yoke and bear another load? The same sort of man who died on a cross saying that by his action and his death the world might have life. The same sort of man people have called Lord and Savior for over two thousand years.

We are standing face to face with the paradoxical nature of Christ's life and message.

His invitation to wear his yoke is extended even to us who worship here today. He says to us if life is a burden, he has a yoke which will help us to bear the load with joy and peace. So if you believe all this and would also call him "Lord and Savior," then the yoke's on you!

The yoke's on you when you commit your life to Jesus Christ. It is the yoke of commitment. For many people, commitment implies limitations on their freedom. A chicken and a hog were walking down a country lane together. They passed a little church that had a sign on the front lawn reading, "support your local church." The hog remarked, "you know, we ought to do something for that little church." The chicken agreed, saying, "yes, perhaps we could raise some money for it with a ham and egg breakfast." The hog replied, "that's easy for you to say; for you

to give a few eggs would be a contribution, but for me to give a ham would require a total commitment.”

Someone once said, “It doesn’t take much of a person to be a Christian, but it takes all of him there is.” Whoever said that put a finger on a great truth and at the same time pointed out a spiritual shortcoming most of us have. It doesn’t take much of a person to be a Christian, because when Christ gave himself he offered himself to each of us. Salvation and life in Christ is not dependent on our worthiness, for none of us is worthy. All of us fall short of what we should be. But it does take all of us there is.

What we tend to do is give God the left-overs of our lives. We are yoked to the fear that if we give the best we have, what is left won’t be sufficient to sustain the lifestyle to which we have become accustomed. Christ comes to exchange that yoke with his yoke.

The yoke’s on you when you have heavy burdens to bear. It is the yoke of comfort. Jesus knew that there are times when life itself is a burden. And even in a time like this he said, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” The Greek word here translated “easy” means well-fitting. In Palestine, the wood was carved out in the carpenter’s shop to fit the one for whom it was made. So, when Jesus says “My yoke fits well” he is saying, “The life I give you is not a burden to gall you; you life, your task, is made to measure for you.” Bernard of Clairvaux expressed this truth when he said, “O blessed yoke that bears the bearer up.” And so it does.

You have heavy burdens and responsibilities in life. Many times you’d like to put them aside and forget about them. But the truth of the matter is, if I could reach out today and take them out of your life, you wouldn’t let me do it. It is in the bearing of our burdens, in the fulfillment of our responsibilities, that we gain strength and courage to live with dignity. When we wear Jesus’ yoke, we see these burdens in a new light and they are easier to bear.

The yoke’s on you when you are trying to do something about your neighbor’s burden. It is the yoke of service. Jesus has sent his disciples out to bear the burdens of others for two millennia. Somebody always needs our help, like the people who stay at St. Agnes’ House or Room in the Inn, those who come to Church Under the Bridge, the people who come to God’s Pantry. When they asked Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?” he told a story of a compassionate Samaritan who bound up the wounds of a stranger by the side of a road. Then he turned the question around and made neighbor the subject rather than the object, “whose neighbor are you?” His yoke enables us to be a neighbor to others who are bearing heavy loads; the frightened, the sick, the hungry, the confused, the lonely, the ugly. And when you care about these and try to do something about their needs, as your youth did on their mission trip to Chicago, then the yoke’s on you.

The yoke’s on you when you are trying to make important decisions about the future. For it is the yoke of hope. We are not simply in a time of transition, there are multiple transitions going on all around us. Transition, as I use the term, is that time of creative and meaningful chaos that follows change. Good Shepherd is in transition between rectors. The Diocese is about to find itself in transition between Bishops. Our nation continues to work its way through transitions related to the 9/11 attack and the banking crisis. Our world is experiencing a vast

cultural transformation. People in this parish this weekend are in transition following the death of a loved one, the birth of a child, and a wedding. In every case, people are trying to make important decisions about the future. We want to do the right thing. We want to be successful. We want to win the race that is set before us.

The famous tennis champion Bill Tilden was always on the lookout for young people who were potential tennis champions. One day he found a young man who had that little something extra. "Young man," Mr. Tilden encouraged him, "If you will practice and really put your heart into it, someday you may be the tennis champion of the world." Greatly excited, this young man applied himself. Some time later, Bill Tilden gave the young tennis player the good news, "I've arranged your first professional match for you. Now show me what you can do." The word spread. The crowd gathered. The game was played. When it was over, the young man rushed up and said, "Well, coach, how did I do?" "You did terrible." "What do you mean? I won didn't I?" Then Bill Tilden told him, "Yes, you won, but you didn't play to win, you just played not to lose."

The Christian life might be compared to a tennis match. To play not to lose is not enough. We who wear the yoke of Christ must play to win. Then we can face the future with hope and confidence, equipped to shape the future of the world we live in, starting with the neighbor next door, and with the help of the One by whom and for whom it was created and redeemed. Jesus' invitation to wear his yoke is an invitation to face the future yoked to him.

If you believe all this and if you intend to respond to the invitation of Jesus, then the yoke's on you – the yoke of commitment, the yoke of comfort the yoke of service, and the yoke of hope. Wear it in the spirit of the One who gives it to you.