

Pentecost 3 2011 [PR9]

Matt. 11:25-30 “A Well-Fitted Yoke”

The Pentecost season of the church year began with the gift of the Holy Spirit that empowered the disciples for witness. If you have been empowered to witness the next question is “To what do I give witness?” The Sunday after Pentecost was “Trinity Sunday” which focused on teaching us who God is...Father, Son, Holy Spirit. That is the content of our witness. Last Sunday the text was from Matthew 10, the discipleship chapter. That text dealt with God’s provision for his disciples as he sent them out to witness. That provision went so far as to reward anyone who gave a disciple a cup of cold water. Today the text is from Matthew 11 where Jesus says, “**Take my yoke upon you...for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.**”

A yoke was something very common in the day of Jesus. Yokes remained about the same from the time of Jesus up until the invention of power machinery in the 19th century. Even today there are places where people still use oxen with a yoke to plow and cultivate the ground. A yoke is an instrument or tool for work. It can be a single yoke or a double yoke.

If a pair of oxen are hitched together to pull a plow they wear a double yoke. A yoke fits over the neck of each animal. There are a number of problems that can arise from this kind of apparatus. First of all the yoke may not fit well. It can be too tight or too loose. Or the yoke may not fit both animals equally well. One animal may be smaller and thus the yoke is too big and doesn't fit squarely on its shoulders. This will impede the performance of that animal. If the animals are of unequal strength that will also affect the performance of the team. You don't yoke an ox with a donkey.

We use the term “yoke” in our time too. We still know what it means for a married couple to be unequally yoked. It means that they are not all that good for each other. Their values may be different, they may have different temperaments or different spiritual beliefs. These differences can cause great trouble in marriage and we say that they are "unequally yoked". Many couples find out that they are unequally yoked too late. In dating and courtship they want the relationship to work so they overlook their differences or down play their disagreements. After they are married they discover that it is very difficult to change their partner and it can be very painful to get out of that unequal relationship.

We are all yoked to many things. You are yoked in many ways to your upbringing, urban or rural, east coast or west coast. People are yoked to their culture, to their prejudices, to the expectations of others. You are yoked to responsibility. You are yoked

to work in order to provide for your family. You are yoked to this earth and to death. None of us will get out of this world alive. You may not like it but that's the way it is.

And most of the yokes we wear are designed to control us and manipulate us and therefore we don't like yokes. And we try hard to cast them off. But we can't. Yokes are a part of life.

Enter Jesus and the text for today where he says, "Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Jesus knows that we are burdened with responsibilities. He knows that life can drag us down and chafe our spirit that longs to be free. Jesus knows this and he offers us something. You will note that he doesn't offer us freedom from all yokes. No. He offers us a change of yokes. He says "take my yoke upon you." My favorite commentator on Matthew is Prof. Frederick Dale Bruner who comments on this verse, "Instead of offering escape, Jesus offers equipment. Jesus means that obedience to his teaching...will develop in us a peace and a balance, a "way" of carrying life that will give more rest than we now find ourselves able to experience." (F. D. Bruner, Matthew Commentary, p. 438).

The yoke of Jesus is both easy and hard. It is easy because in wearing it you are tethered to Christ Jesus who is the way the truth and the life, the light of the world, the redeemer of sinners, the hope of heaven. He walks with you through life to encourage you, help you, guide you. To know Jesus and to walk through life with him is to know peace and joy.

The yoke of Jesus is easy because you are free in Christ. But it is not libertarian freedom. It is not freedom FROM but freedom FOR. He sets you free to live as a child of God and heir of eternal life. God knows you and your needs and desires. And because God made you and cares for you He wants you to live life fully, successfully - but by his definition and guidance.

What is the purpose of a yoke? In the case of animals it is to enable them to work, to do productive tasks, to harness their power for useful purposes. The yoke of Jesus is for the same purpose. To make your life good and productive and useful. You are yoked to Christ in order to please God and to be of service to others.

Listen to Professor Bruner again... "A yoke is not a sitting instrument; it is a walking instrument. Jesus does not say, "Take my chair and learn from me," he says, "Take my yoke and learn from me," which means that as we seek to live in simple obedience to

Jesus we learn from Jesus.... Jesus prefers to teach “on the way” in the life-process.”
(Bruner, p. 439).

And the yoke that God gives you is different from what he gives your neighbor. "My yoke is easy and my burden is light" can be literally translated "My yoke is well fitting and makes the work light." God knows you. He made you. He has given you a unique set of strengths, talents and abilities. And he calls you to use those abilities to His glory and for the good of your neighbor. When you use those God-given abilities you find that indeed you can use them almost effortlessly because the power to be useful comes from God who works in you and through the skills and abilities He has given you. Jesus called 12 disciples. They were not all the same. Peter was a natural leader, bold and strong, but also impulsive. Matthew was a tax collector, James and John were fishermen. They all had unique abilities and talents and God used them all to spread the gospel. Each of them influenced many others by pointing to Jesus in their own unique way.

When I was growing up I listened to stories my father told about how he worked with horses when he was young. The horses he grew up around were draft animals named Storm and Dan. Dan was the older of the two horses. He was the lead horse and would keep Storm in line by walking in the furrow as they pulled the plow together. He taught Storm the ways of work. You may never know when someone else is watching you and learning from you. What they learn can be positive or negative. They can learn how to be and how not to be. Each day you have an opportunity to be a winsome witness in what you say and what you do as a follower of Jesus.

Wearing the yoke of Christ means walking with Jesus through life and letting him take the lead. This results in a life that is lived with purpose and meaning and joy.

Jesus said "Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Prayer: Lord Jesus, bind us to you in obedience and love and make us useful in your kingdom this week. We pray in Jesus' name. AMEN.