

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 9, 2017
The Rev. Ellen Mills
St. Thomas Lutheran Church Bloomington, Indiana
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 - Yoked to Jesus

Jesus has finished his instructions to the twelve disciples he has sent out, and now he heads off to teach and proclaim in nearby cities. And John the Baptist, from where he was imprisoned, has sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he really is the Messiah, the one they have been expecting. Shouldn't John have known this? This question of what sort of Messiah Jesus would be there throughout his ministry. He was eagerly received by some, but not by others. He wasn't what everyone expected. Yet were those expectations reasonable? Both John and Jesus experienced rejection. And Jesus refers to this in the first part of this passage as he described how differently he and John lived, yet they were both rejected. There wasn't just one prophecy about this Messiah who was to come and save them, there were numerous prophecies. The prophecy in Zechariah, often read in conjunction with Palm Sunday, refers to a leader on a donkey rather than on a war horse. It refers to peace and the freeing of prisoners. And Jesus had responded to John the Baptist's disciples with prophetic words from Isaiah about the blind receiving sight, the lame walking, the lepers being cleansed, the deaf hearing, the dead being raised and the poor receiving good news. This is how Jesus described his ministry and life to John the Baptist. It is **this** Messiah that Jesus has come to be.

And within this context of being questioned and claiming his ministry, Jesus issues the invitation at the end of this passage. He calls out to those who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. And he refers to a **yoke**. This term, yoke, could refer to two things, and it most likely involved both. Because Jesus was speaking to Jews who lived in the Roman Empire. Their reality was one of oppression by the Empire. They were often treated harshly, they were heavily taxed, many were poor. This was not the Israel of old when they ruled their own land. This was occupation by another country, another language, another set of laws. They were wearing the yoke of Roman occupation. **Yoke** also had a meaning to faithful Jews. It was a rabbinic metaphor for obedience to the Torah,

something both difficult and joyous. And Jesus promises them rest. This **rest** could well have referred to the Sabbath rest in Genesis. And in this reference to yoke and rest, Jesus describes himself as gentle and humble of heart.

In Jesus' offer, I hear a choice that involves a both/and. The people hearing Jesus would have been under the Roman yoke of oppression. They were being offered the yoke of Jesus. Yet they would be living in both worlds. They would be physically living in the Roman Empire. But they would also be living in the realm of God. They would be experiencing a peace and freedom in the midst of what could be harsh daily life. I find it interesting that they are **not** being offered a **yoke free** life. The offer is for a new yoke that would bring rest. This parallels the writings of Paul when he talks about being a slave to sin, or being a slave of Jesus. It is what I call freed from and freed for. We talk a lot about freedom in this country. And often it is talk about being freed from, the sort of freedom that teenagers long for. Living on their own, no more rules from Mom and Dad, what could be better? But we were **freed from** sin in order to be **free for** love of God and neighbor. We were made for this, and in this we will find our deepest selves and peace and joy.

One of my delights in the rural area of Ohio where I served was the Amish workhorses. These are very different from the buggy horses. Many of the buggy horses are retired sulky racing horses, and they do not like to stand still. They are all about speed. The work horses were a larger and bigger boned breed of horse. They were brown with lighter manes and tails. On Sunday I would see them hanging out in the pastures, since Sunday was the Sabbath for them as well. But during the week I would see them plowing or pulling wagons. It was common to see two, and sometimes four. They were harnessed together to pull heavy loads. I can only assume that they had undergone some sort of training, and that they were accustomed to their partners. Because what I saw was beautiful teamwork. The horses were strong and slow and deliberate. They knew what to do and they did it for hours at a time. And it is this image that I bring with me to this passage. What is it to be yoked with Jesus? Jesus tells us to take his yoke upon us and learn from him. And this is my image of how we learn. We don't learn by reading some

sort of written directions. We learn by being in close relationship and moving with Jesus, over and over again. We learn to follow him by going with and beside him. This relationship molds our actions. We are called into partnership. We have already been called, accepted, forgiven and filled with the Spirit. Now it is time to go forth to do what Jesus is calling us to do. And we do it together.

In order to take up the yoke of Jesus, we need to let go of the burdens we have been carrying by ourselves. We need to let go of whatever keeps us from accepting the yoke of Jesus. The difficulty can be in recognizing what holds us back. What are we not willing to disclose or share with Jesus? Or the difficulty may go deeper still. It may go to who we believe God is. And I am not calling for a recitation of the creed. I am saying, do your actions and does your relationship with God come from a trust in the grace and mercy of God? Or are you still trying to be perfect on your own? It is much easier to talk about grace than live it. The Psalm this morning starts with a quotation from a passage in Exodus that may be one of the oldest passages of the Bible. **“The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”** I think it is much easier to reveal ourselves to a God who is merciful and loving than one we believe cannot accept our failures. It is much easier to accept an invitation for deeper relationship with the one who is “gentle and humble of heart” than one we believe is harshly judging. We grow in relationship when we trust enough to be vulnerable. Trust allows risk.

I see a growing relationship as a dance. We start with enough trust to take a tentative step of risk. If all goes well, we then can take a second step. If that goes well, we take another. We are called to a dynamic relationship with Jesus, and one where we are taught by him, and we are led into ministry with him. This is far different from what I call “God on the shelf” where we say that we are Christians, but we only respond to God when we think we need something. As long as our lives seem to be going well, we leave God on the shelf. All is fine until the next crisis. **But is this relationship?** And is this active trust and risk? What would you say if your marriage were like that, if your relationship with your spouse, after many years together, was no deeper than it was on your wedding day? **Surely** we expect that sort of committed relationship to grow. And

surely we are aware that it grows through the ups and downs of daily life together, and that it also is a dance of trust and risk. If we never allow ourselves to be known, it is unlikely the relationship will be deep. If we never express our needs, it is unlikely the relationship will be deep.

Jesus is not asking us or expecting us to go it alone. Jesus is not asking us to be self-sufficient and to pride ourselves on how little help we “need.” Jesus is asking us to take his yoke and put it on ourselves, to be willing to be taught and led and accompanied. This is the life of fullness and joy, regardless of what our outer circumstances are at the moment. We are made for this. We are called to this. And we are called into the ministry that Jesus is already doing. Our heart becomes molded by his compassion, and his sight and his concerns become ours. And we will find that indeed his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. AMEN