

SHARING THE BURDEN

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The Sunday morning worship service was finished. It must have been a summer day, because the congregation members were headed outside to enjoy cookies and lemonade in the brick portico between the sanctuary and the church office building. Nancy and I were greeting folks as they came out the door. We were wearing our black pulpit robes and green stoles. As the church members came by, they spoke to Nancy first. I was standing immediately on her left. I noticed one woman take Nancy's green stole in her fingers, rub the material, and say, "Nancy, this is a beautiful stole." Then she leaned in a little closer and said, "But, you know, it clashes with the blouse you're wearing today." In the car on our way home, Nancy said, "Well, I guess I know what she was thinking about during worship this morning!" Over the years, people have commented on my ties, but I've never had anyone point out that my stole clashes with my tie!

I read a story this week about a Presbyterian minister who was standing in the rain by an open grave, waiting for all of the family to arrive so he could begin the graveside service. He wore his robe and a stole. It was quiet and, actually, quite peaceful. Then a woman in the back row raised her hand. The minister didn't know what to do, so he tried to ignore her. But she kept looking at him with her hand up. Finally he nodded at her and this is what she said: "I'm Episcopal. And my priest wears different looking stuff than that. Like the robe and the colors and the thing around your neck. . . it all looks different. What does it all mean and why do you all wear it?"¹

"Why do you all wear it?" That's a good question. This colored piece of fabric around my neck is called a *stole*. Some people think the stole has its origins in the Jewish *tallit* or prayer shawl, worn as a reminder of the duties and obligations to God and God's law. The practice is described in Numbers 15:37-41: "The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the Israelites, and tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a blue cord on the fringe at each corner. You have the fringe so that, when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them, and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes. So you shall remember and do all my commandments, and you shall be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God."

Another tradition links the stole to the napkin used by Jesus to wash his disciples' feet on the night before he died. As one source notes, it "is a fitting symbol of the yoke of Christ, the yoke of service."² And there is a connection between the stole around my neck and the words of Jesus, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:29-30)

I learned something new this week. When I iron my shirts, I always begin with the piece that runs across the shoulders; then I iron one side, the back, the other side, the sleeves, and, finally, the collar. I had no idea the piece of fabric across the shoulders is called the “yoke.” Thank you, Emily Wells, for teaching me that. And, thank you, Emily, for your comment that the yoke is what holds everything else together in the shirt.

According to the “Art of Style Club: Lifestyle for the Everyday Man” website, the yoke “is essentially the piece of the garment that behaves as a hanger, and creates the crisp lines of the shirt’s backside. If a yoke is not well-made, it can cause gathering of the fabric in the center of the back, which makes the back look pinched, and often cheapens the entire look of the dress shirt.” According to the “Art of Style Club,” the answer to the question “Are all yokes created equal?” is “No, they are designed with the human shoulder and back in mind. Each person has their own shape, and lifestyle that can change the way their shoulders move. When a tailor is creating the shirt, they consider several elements: the width of the shoulder; the slope of the shoulder; and which way the shoulders bend, either forward or backwards.”³

And that sounds a lot like how a yoke for animals is fashioned and used. Picture a pair of oxen yoked together to pull a heavy load. The wooden yoke might look like a heavy burden itself, but the yoke actually lightens the load, harnesses the animals’ energy, and helps them work together. Here’s another interesting thing I learned this week. I just assumed a yoke would be one-size-fits-all, but that’s the worst thing a farmer can do for the animals. According to one article, “No matter what the task, the most important part of the yoke and the animals chosen to do the job is how well the yoke is made to fit those particular animals. Heavy work in the field or on the road will quickly show where the weaknesses are in any yoking system. A good yoke or harnessing system is one that minimizes breakdowns of both animals and equipment. A properly fitting yoke will not produce any discomfort or cause sores to form but allow the animal to work at its full potential. Of course, the yoke does not take away the work but aids the animal in performing the task.”⁴

When I started working on this sermon, Jesus’ words, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” seemed to point to a sermon about the peace and rest and relief we can find in Jesus from life’s challenges and trials and burdens. I remember how good it felt, when I used to go on long hikes on the Appalachian Trail with a heavy backpack, to reach a shelter, drop my pack on the ground and lie down with my feet propped up. That’s what Jesus’ words called to mind — letting go of all of your burdens.

And that’s true — Jesus **can** bring us that kind of rest and relief, if we take our burdens to him. But that’s not really what Jesus is talking about when he says, “Come to me . . . and I will give you rest.” For he also says, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me . . . For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:29-30) Contrast Jesus’ invitation with his criticism of the scribes and Pharisees, “Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they

teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.” (Matthew 23:3-4)

While it’s true and comforting that Jesus can give us rest and relief from the burdens of life, here he is talking about our life of faith and our service to God. Sometimes it helps to hear familiar Bible verses in a new way. Listen to two other renditions of Jesus talking about taking his yoke upon our shoulders.

The first is from Clarence Jordan’s *The Cotton Patch Gospel of Matthew*: “Come to me, all of you who are frustrated and have had a bellyful, and I will give you zest. Get in the harness with me and let me Leach you, for I am trained and have a cooperative spirit, and you will find zest for your lives. For my harness is practical, and my assignment is joyful.”

The second is from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me — watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

In other words, the yoke of Jesus is custom-fitted to each of us, so as to minimize breakdowns, discomfort, and sores, and allow each of us to work for God to our full potential. As was said about the yoke for animals, the yoke does not take away the work, but aids in performing the task. One writer puts it this way, “To accept the yoke of the gentle and humble Lord is to embrace the worthy task that puts the soul at ease.”⁵

It seems contradictory or counter-intuitive — if you’re weary and carrying heavy burdens, go to Jesus and put on a yoke. But Jesus’ invitation to share the burden sounds similar to Paul’s description of the freedom we have in Christ. We’re not free to do anything and everything — we’re free to live for and to love God in a way that we’ve never been able to do before. And that freedom to love extends to our neighbors, as well — “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Galatians 5:13-14)

God calls his people to love and serve him, and we want to know how to do that. God says, “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days . . .” (Deuteronomy 30:19-20) But we so quickly and so often turn that life of obedience and love into a heavy burden. It’s bad enough when we put that kind of burden on our own shoulders. It’s even worse when we “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.” (Matthew 23:4) That’s exactly what the apostle Peter warned against when the Jewish Christians gathered in Jerusalem to debate what to do about the Gentiles who were believing the gospel, accepting Jesus as Lord, and receiving the Holy Spirit. Some wanted to require the Gentiles to become Jews before they could be full-fledged members of the community — that is, take on the Jewish law with all of its requirements. But Peter, himself the leader of the Jewish Christians, stood up in the assembly and challenged

his fellow Jewish Christians, “Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” (Acts 15:10-11)

I’ll let you think about how to answer these questions — What yokes do we put on the necks of others that make it harder for them, not easier, to follow Jesus and do God’s work? What stumbling blocks do we put in the way of people who want to love God and love Jesus and serve God’s people with their love? What rules, regulations, traditions, and expectations, as well-intentioned as they might be, get in the way of our ministry and helping people love Jesus? Or, as Jan Edmiston, the co-moderator of our General Assembly, recently asked us in her sermon at the East Community gathering in Sneads Ferry, “What do we love more than Jesus?”

A few weeks ago, I made reference in my Pentecost Sunday sermon to the movie *Chocolat*, about a quiet French village in which the mayor, Comte de Reynaud, tried to keep order and decorum in the village and the local church by tying up heavy burdens and laying them on the villagers’ necks.

Near the end of the movie, despite the mayor’s Saturday night coaching so his Easter sermon will be perfect and inspiring, the young priest, Pere Henri, finds his own voice in the pulpit on Easter Sunday. As he looks out on his congregation, many of whom have had their lives transformed by the woman in the chocolate shop, Pere Henri lays down his manuscript of his sermon and says, “I’m not sure what the theme of my homily today ought to be. Do I want to speak of the miracle of Our Lord’s divine transformation? Not really, no. I don’t want to talk about His divinity. I’d rather talk about His humanity. I mean, you know, how He lived His life, here on Earth. His ‘kindness,’ His ‘tolerance’ . . . Listen, here’s what I think. I think that we can’t go around . . . measuring our goodness by what we don’t do. By what we deny ourselves, what we resist, and who we exclude. I think . . . we’ve got to measure goodness by what we ‘embrace,’ what we create . . . and who we include.”

Jesus calls us to a life of devotion and obedience and service. Such a lifestyle can easily become a burden for us, if we think we have to do everything on our own. It can become a burden for others when we put our expectations above God’s. But Jesus’ call to such a life comes with a gracious invitation, “Come to me, I will give you rest . . . Take my yoke upon you . . . Let me share your burden.”

Let us pray: Lord, in times of weakness and need, your strength is what helps us carry on. When our load is heavy and too much to bear, your arms stretch out to help us. When we try to do it all by ourselves, you call out, “Come to me and take on my yoke.” When we think we can’t do what you call us to do, you tell us, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Lord, we give you thanks and praise. Amen.

NOTES

¹Brian Christopher Coulter, “Why do you all wear it?” November 3, 2015, *The Presbyterian Outlook* at www.pres-outlook.org.

²“Stole (vestment)” at www.en.wikipedia.org.

³“Yokes On Dress Shirts - How Do They Matter?” in *Art of Style Club: Lifestyle for the Everyday Man* at www.artofstyle.club.

⁴Ronny H. Graham, “Take My Yoke Upon You. What Is a Yoke?” at www.cgg.org.

⁵Lance Pape, “Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Vol. 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 217.