

**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Proper 9**  
**Year A**

**Taking on Jesus' Yoke**

[RCL:] **Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45:11-18; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

There is some debate about whether or not people can change. The spiritual and psychological sages throughout the millennia basically agree that people can learn better ways to cope with who and how they are, but people don't change all that much. Transformation can occur, though that's for later in this sermon. But changing is hard, maybe even impossible, and changing another person, well, that's just folly—pure folly. It has been said that having expectations for others and wanting them to be more like we would have them is just a downpayment on future disappointment. This might sound down and dour, but good news is on the way.

All notions of progress have to do with growth and change, and personal progress is usually cloaked in the power of our own wills to change ourselves. If we all just had the right information, the right policy, the right data, then we would just be who we are meant to be. But as Derek Sivers says, "If all that we needed was more information then we would all be millionaires with perfect abs."

Perhaps you have some experience with trying to stop some behavior only to return again and again to what you don't want to do, much like St. Paul in the epistle reading today. Maybe you have been trying to lose weight for years only to gain it all back. Maybe you have been trying to grow closer to God through feats of discipline in prayer and study, only to feel cold and distant from God. No. Instead, our happiness, our fulfillment, our satisfaction, and ultimately our growth in Christ has less to do with taking on more data, and more to do with unlearning a great deal.

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus is clearly frustrated. He indicates that those around him criticized John the Baptist as being possessed by a demon. Then they criticized Jesus for eating and drinking with the wrong people too often. Jesus then prays aloud to God, in thanks for having hidden the purposes of what God is up to in Jesus from the wise and wonderful of his age. He then says something that has become so famous that you could be forgiven for not truly listening to what he says: "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."

Aren't you weary? Aren't you carrying a heavy burden? Don't you need a rest? We are all weary and heavy-laden. Each of us is dealing with something, or a whole litany of somethings, that if we all had to wear them outwardly, I daresay we'd have a much more compassionate world.

But Jesus is inviting us into something completely different. Jesus first names our spiritual state. This is an amazingly compassionate thing to do, to notice and name, to tell the truth of a situation. Sometimes it is enough simply to have someone notice our weariness and burdens. This noticing, without judgment or fixing, is a lesson in empathy for all of us. That might be the distinction between empathy and pity, by the way.

Then Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon ourselves. This is an interesting image that most of us modern types might not understand. A yoke is for a donkey or other beast of burden. It is a collar that harnesses the animal for whatever work that the master wants the animal to do, like pulling a cart or plowing a field. The yoke is a symbol of servitude and onerous labor. But the yoke that Jesus is offering is easy and light.

What does this mean, “my yoke is easy and my burden is light”? In our world and society, clever and never-ending marketing would have us believe that each and all of us are deficient in some way. Jesus and, by no extension at all, God, accepts us precisely where and what we are with no exceptions. The world has become exceedingly sophisticated in laying heavy burdens upon us. The largest companies in the world deploy deeply effective psychological understandings on us to encourage us to feel that we must scratch this or that itch immediately, or buy into some lifestyle in order to be the happiest or most authentic self we can. This has been captured most recently by the acronym “FOMO,” or “fear of missing out.”

Now the world is not some separate creation or arena of evil. The world, as the church has usually described it, is that which does not proclaim Christ as Lord, so it does not live by the light burdens of Jesus and instead heaps up heavier and heavier burdens. Of course, the history of the Church is littered with teachers and rules that have given heavy burdens to certain people to designate them as less than loved by God, but they were wrong and actively working against the intentions of Jesus.

Jesus does not expect or desire for us to take on more and more in discipleship to him. His learning is an unlearning, his burdens are an unburdening. His work is a rest. What this looks like in a daily practice is a constant reminder that we are enough, we are sufficient. This is not some mere positive thinking, feel-good humanism. Our sufficiency with God is not about our own inherent goodness, though there may well be some inherent goodness in us, it is about God’s goodness and love and acceptance of us. So we remind ourselves every day of God’s goodness and love.

And then, if we are brave and want to be taught by Jesus, we can extend God’s radical love to those whom God presents us with each day. Since God’s love is unconditioned, since this loving yoke is easy, and the burden of acceptance is light, since it is unlearning to judge others, what would it be to live like this? What would it be like to love that person who annoys you? What would it be like to love that estranged relative or friend? What would it be like to love that politician who you not only disagree with but who actively enacts policies that hurt those you already love? Jesus is not asking you to be foolish and merely accept injustice, but he is inviting us to love. And while Jesus meets us all where we are and accepts us for who we are, he does not let us stay that way. To encounter Jesus is to be transformed. I cannot think of a single encounter Jesus has in Scripture where the other person did not leave changed or challenged. Jesus is not in the trans-fixing business, he is in the *transforming* business. This love can transform you and this world, but it is hard. To follow Jesus is work, it is still a yoke, no matter how easy.

I think this is where the marketers and the fear-of-missing-out folks get life wrong. To change, to be transformed, is not to start with deficiency or want, but with love and acceptance. Now, love and acceptance are simply bad for the economy, but in God’s economy, love and acceptance are the starting point. This is why Jesus describes discipleship to him as easy and light burdens: following him makes a

beginning in not requiring a series of good behaviors in an attempt to earn love. Once we understand our status as beloved, we can make the radical turn to do the same: loving others without condition or remainder.

May the Holy Spirit empower each of us to go into the world and love as deeply as we are loved by God. Amen.

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