

“If The Yoke Fits, Wear It!”

Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

King Duncan tells about a young mother who was describing a terrible day she had experienced. The washing machine broke down, the telephone kept ringing, her head ached, and the mail carrier brought a bill she had no money to pay. Almost to the breaking point, she lifted her one-year-old into his highchair, leaned her head against the tray, and began to cry.

Without a word, her son took his pacifier out of his mouth and stuck it in hers.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest....” says Jesus, *“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.”*

This is not exactly 21st century language. Yoke? What’s a yoke? Is it an egg yoke? It reminds me of a line from the movie *My Cousin Vinny* when the judge asked the defense attorney: “Yoot? What’s a yoot?”

Most of you can visualize the kind of yoke Jesus had in mind. It was a kind of crossbar with two U-shaped pieces that encircled the necks of a pair of oxen. The easiest interpretation of this text is that when we are yoked to Jesus, He walks beside us and helps us bear our burdens. We don’t have to bear the weight of our world by ourselves. That is the obvious teaching, and it is a beautiful teaching. But there are many ways in which being yoked to Christ gives us rest.

Note, first of all, that there are other forms of fatigue more draining than physical fatigue. Mental fatigue and emotional fatigue can wear on us far more than physical fatigue.

In 1863, the Civil War was raging and the end was far from sight. Abraham Lincoln was out for a ride with his friend and aide Noah Brooks. Brooks, noticing the president’s obvious fatigue, suggested that he take a brief rest when they got back to the White House.

“A rest,” Lincoln replied, “I don’t know about a rest. I suppose it’s good for the body, but the tired part of me is inside and out of reach.”

Lincoln was acknowledging a very important truth. There are many sources of fatigue. Physical fatigue may be the most benign. There is the fatigue that comes from stress. Fatigue that comes from worry. Fatigue that comes not only from worrying about the

future, but also worrying about the past. Fatigue that comes from trying to be something we are not.

Again, we hear the words of Jesus -- spoken to Abe Lincoln and to us -- *“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.”*

To take on the yoke of Jesus, is NOT to take on a burden that we are incapable of bearing. Rather, it means that we accept God’s acceptance of us. It means that we finally realize that when we place our full trust in Christ, we are placed in right relationship with God. And we can rest in that!

Some of you may have seen the Johnny Cash movie, Walk the Line. When Cash was 12-years-old his older brother died in a tragic accident. Cash’s father took his grief out on Johnny. “Death took the wrong boy” his father told him time and time again. His brother was the good boy. He should have lived. Johnny was the bad boy. If anyone should have died, it should have been Johnny. No wonder Johnny Cash spent so many years acting out his rage and his feelings of being “no good.” Can you imagine a father doing that to his son? No wonder that, for many years of his life, Johnny Cash engaged in self-destructive behavior. It’s a wonder he survived at all. But isn’t it great that, by the second half of his life, Johnny Cash discovered a Heavenly Father who accepted him just as he was.

Cash’s situation may have been extreme, but there are many people who feel for one reason or another that they do not belong, that their life has little value. That they are failures who can never measure up. Many of these rebel in anti-social behavior. But there are many others who, while they do not rebel, put themselves under an intolerable burden of expectations that they cannot possibly live up to. These expectations produce both stress and fatigue. To be able to relax and be ourselves is one of the greatest benefits our faith gives us.

Soren Kierkegaard was a Danish philosopher who suffered bouts of extreme melancholy, undoubtedly due to a difficult upbringing. One day he wrote in his Journal, “And now, with God’s help, I shall become myself.”

What a liberating thought: “And now, with God’s help, I shall become myself.” Not what others expect me to be. Not some unrealistic image I have of myself. No, with God’s help I shall become who I really am. No more stressful pretenses. No more misguided strivings. I will relax and be me. When we feel accepted by Christ, then for the first time in our life we become free. When we are yoked to Jesus we no longer have to prove to the world that we belong.

In 1971, a man named Gavin Bryars was living in London, England. He was working with a friend on a documentary about homeless people living in a rough area near a train station in London. Most of these people had their lives ravaged by alcohol and drugs. Now they lived in desperate conditions. The film makers wanted to tell their story.

It is interesting to note that sometimes, during the making of the documentary, these forlorn and forgotten people would “ham” it up for the cameras. They would break into drunken singing. Sometimes, says Bryars, you would hear bits of opera, sometimes sentimental ballads.

However, one homeless old man who, in fact, did not drink, says Gavin Bryars, was singing something else. And Bryars caught his song on tape. It turned out the old man was singing a simple religious song that went like this, “Jesus’ blood never failed me yet, Never failed me yet, never failed me yet. This one thing I know, for he loves me so.”

Bryars was haunted by the sincerity and simplicity of the old man’s voice. He took the tape home with him and began listening to it. He discovered that the old man’s singing was in perfect pitch with his piano, and so he began improvising a simple accompaniment. He noticed that the first section of the song, 13 bars in length, formed an effective loop a track which could be repeated in a slightly unpredictable way. He took the tape loop to the school where he was working in the Fine Arts Department. He copied the loop onto a continuous reel of tape. This would allow him later to add an orchestrated accompaniment with rich harmonies played by a live ensemble of strings and brass.

The studio in which Bryars was working on his precious tape was next to a busy art studio. He decided to take a break for a cup of coffee.

Unintentionally, he left the loop playing and his door open while he went out. When he came back to the studio he found the normally lively room outside adjoining the art studio unnaturally subdued. People were moving about much more slowly than usual and a few were sitting alone, quietly weeping.

He was puzzled until he realized that the tape was still playing and that they had been overcome by the old man’s singing this simple testimony of faith: “Jesus’ blood never failed me yet, Never failed me yet, never failed me yet. This one thing I know, for he loves me so.” There was something about the voice, something about the song, something about the message of Christ’s love that was striking a chord with these secular art students. The old man was singing a song they all needed to hear a song of love, acceptance, forgiveness.

Bryars went on to produce a powerful recording anchored by this homeless man's thin but sincere voice.

This homeless man may have had nothing else in his life, but he held to one critical piece of hope that Jesus had died for him, that Jesus loved him regardless of who he was or what he had done, that he was loved, accepted, forgiven.

There is an ancient legend that says that, in the region of Galilee two thousand years ago, all the farmers knew where to get the finest yokes for their oxen. There was a certain carpenter in Nazareth famed for shaping and smoothing the wood so that the burden on their oxen would be as light as possible.

Christ is still in the business of fashioning yokes to ease the burdens of His weary children. He still says to people today, *"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."* Amen.