

THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 9, 2023

ZECHARIAH 9:9-12 | PSALM 145:8-14 | ROMANS 7:15-25A | MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

Today's gospel reading is of a type. Jesus makes a very profound point about discipleship. And he illustrates that point by drawing our attention to a piece of agricultural equipment that—unless you grew up on a farm or you were a 90s kid who grew up playing Oregon Trail—few of us have much experience with. Today's it all about the yoke.

It may be unusual to most of us twenty-first century suburbanites, but it was a common point of reference in Jesus's world, and it's an image that comes up frequently in the Bible. Sometimes the scriptures talk of yokes with negative connotations. In Jeremiah, for example, the prophet makes a yoke and wears it as a sign of the coming exile. But a yoke could also be a good thing. In the apocryphal Sirach, the yoke is an image of adherence to God's law. In both cases, the yoke is a symbol of what orders your life. What values and priorities, realities and aspirations shape your day-to-day existence in the world?

And if the yoke is about what gives our life definition and meaning, then everyone has one. You don't get to choose whether you have a yoke or not. You just get to choose what you're yoked to. As Bob Dylan once put it, "Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord / But you're gonna have to serve somebody." Or as St. Matthew croon, "You're gonna wear *someone's* yoke."

So we might begin by identifying some of the yokes that we take on. What are the interests that we end up serving, the goals and aspirations that define our lives? Let's just begin with some easy ones. One obvious one would be wealth. Of making the ultimate goal or value in your life just racking up how much money is in your bank account and viewing everything in terms of whether it's good or bad for your wallet. Or it could be our social status. Instead of asking whether a decision would be beneficial to us and our neighbors, we might ask, *Will this make my life look more or less desirable to other people? What will people say about me?* Or it could be a sense of exceptionalism that differentiates us from other people. That we are unique and different, and that we should be immune from the perils of living.¹

Part of the appeal of these yokes is how light they seem when you first put them on. The start off easy. When you get more money in your bank account, you'll get that little dopamine hit in your brain. When you impress your neighbors, you get that nice ego boost. When you get a stroke of good luck, you think, *Well, of course I deserved that. I'm a good person.*

But over time, these yokes that felt so light start to get a little bit heavy. Because you have to keep putting them on again and again and again. If wealth is your yoke, there will always be someone with more. If social status is your yoke, you will end up afraid of your neighbors and what they might say about you behind your back. If exceptionalism is your yoke, you will interpret any disappointment or struggle in your life as a sign of a personal failure.

Regardless of the choice, the result will be the same. The yoke that felt so light at the start will become harder to carry as time goes on. In the fourth century, the desert father John the Dwarf put it this way, "We have put the light burden to one side... and we have loaded ourselves with a heavy one, that is to say, self-justification."² The yoke that promises life and happiness and fulfillment becomes a heavy burden to bear. And to have to put that yoke down feels like failure. It

¹ Basically all Kate Bowler's books.

² Quoted in Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another*, 2003, 46.

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means giving up, giving in, admitting defeat. That we can't be as "successful" as other people. That we can't keep up with the Joneses. That we're more like other people than we'd like to admit. Dropping the yoke is a kind of death.

Which is exactly why we need to hear the invitation that Jesus gives us to take on his yoke. At first glance, this appears to be a bad trade. The yoke that Jesus offers us is an intimidating one. To take on Jesus's yoke entails loving without condition, praying for our enemies, and—as if that isn't enough—"be[ing] perfect" as God is perfect. It's a yoke that seems to have impossibly high standards, a yoke that can only set us up for failure and drag us down even further.

But the yoke that Jesus offers us is different from all the other ones we put on. And it's different because it is the kind of burden that we can put down without becoming a failure. It's the only yoke that says right up front, "You're not going to meet the standard. You'll try to love without condition and pray for your enemies and literally 'be perfect.' You won't. And that's okay. Because even when the yoke falls off, you can always take it back up again."

Unlike the old yokes that seem light but turn out to be heavy, Jesus offers a yoke that seems impossibly heavy but turns out to be not just bearable, but life-giving. Christ's burden is light because it saves us from having to keep up appearances for others or to reassure ourselves of our value. Because while we may be unsure what others think of us and may even feel like strangers to ourselves, we do know what God thinks about us. And we know that because of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

Jesus tells us that there is one group of people who really "get" this. They take on his yoke eagerly and joyfully. And it's not religious leaders. It's not the devout. It's children, especially younger children. Because they have not tried to define a sense of self by taking on any of the world's yokes on offer. They don't try to prove their worth by looking at their wealth. They don't make their self-worth dependent on others' opinions of them. They don't see themselves as different from others. Instead of trying to justify themselves and their lives, they just receive life as a gift. The strange logic of Christ's yoke is understood not by the intelligent or the well-read or pious but by children.

For many of us, having our lives shaped by Christ's yoke way is a long way from our default setting. The old yokes we've left behind may have left a mark on us. God knows—literally—that we're bound to mess it up and drop this new yoke pretty quick. And yet, Jesus invites us anyway and promises us grace along the way. Helping us unlearn all the coping mechanisms we've used to bear our heavy burdens. And inviting us to walk with him in newness of life. "Take my yoke upon you," Jesus says, "And learn from me."

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