

Proper 9A, Saint John's Olney, 9 July 2017

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Gen 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Ps 45: 11-18; Rom 7:15-25a; Mat 11:16-19, 25-30

S.D.G.

In Jesus' era it was certainly not uncommon for young men to apprentice with their father, or another tradesman, so that they could learn a skill. Going into the family business was often the norm.

There is a really cute cartoon that relates to Jesus and his family business, as is the practice of the internet it resurfaces periodically so many of you will recognize it next time around. The image is of a young man, long hair, robes, a typical caricature of Jesus, and he is building a chair. There is much saw dust and tools about, but the chair is barely recognizable as a chair; it is not the product of a skilled craftsman. The man is looking up from his work and says "Dad, I sense a call to ministry".

In some households, those words, 'I sense a call to ministry', can wreak havoc, but in this case you have the sense that Joseph is relieved and saying 'thanks be to God' he is not a woodworker. So Jesus is following in the family business, the business created by his Father, Lord of heaven and earth. Being an apprentice to God the Father, and not Joseph, is far more promising.

As a point of interest, earlier in the passage, there is a reference to Jesus as 'a glutton and a drunkard'. That is a harsh description that comes from Deuteronomy. In the 21st chapter it says: *"If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death."* (21:18-21) This is just one example of the yoke that the Pharisees placed upon those who worshiped God. They laid the yoke of all 613 laws of the Pentateuch upon their followers and those who sought their advice of how to please God.

Part of the yoke of the Law is that it is revealed only to the wise and the intelligent, for the long tradition of Torah study and piety is that by devoting oneself to study you would find God. But the level of scholarly study and time required for this was only available to the religious leaders.

Jesus turns around the idea of who will understand God's ways, like so much it is turned upside down; our translation says that God has revealed His ways to infants. Looking at Eugene Peterson's Message version of this passage we hear:

*Abruptly Jesus broke into prayer: "Thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth. You've concealed your ways from sophisticates and know-it-alls, but spelled them out clearly to ordinary people. Yes, Father, that's the way you like to work."*

God has revealed his ways to ordinary people, and Jesus hangs out with sinners and tax collectors. This passage is much about 'like Father, like Son'. Peterson's version continues:

*Jesus resumed talking to the people, but now tenderly. "The Father has given me all these things to do and say. This is a unique Father-Son operation, coming out of Father and Son intimacies and knowledge. No one knows the Son the way the Father does, nor the Father the way the Son does. But I'm not keeping it to myself; I'm ready to go over it line by line with anyone willing to listen."*

Jesus has apprenticed with God the Father and now is willing to take on apprentices of his own; He is willing to teach you and me. As we discussed, the Pharisees in their teaching laid the burden, the yoke, of 613 laws upon their followers. Each of those laws came with the threat of a punishment, of retribution, if they were not followed. The burden of these laws was indeed great. Even the burden of the Sabbath, the day of rest, was great. On numerous occasions Jesus was rebuked for blaspheming the Sabbath. To Jesus, the restrictive interpretations of the Law limited the fulfilling of the ways of God. The yoke He offered was indeed light. Again, the Message version of this passage says:

*"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."*

When I first encountered this passage and the phrase "for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" it always seemed to me that this was an example of Jesus' humor and irony. I could not imagine the yoke of God being easy and light, and now I can not image anything but that.

The rabbinic literature compares the yoke of the kingdom of man to the yoke of the kingdom of heaven. The full statement is: "Whoever takes upon himself the yoke of the Torah, they remove from him the yoke of government and the yoke of worldly concerns, and whoever breaks off the yoke of the Torah, they place on him the yoke of government and the yoke of worldly concerns". The weight of the world is not one I wish to carry; however, the yoke of the reign of God is one that I revel in.

The yoke of the reign of God refers to a passage from Deuteronomy: "Hear, O people: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (6:4-5) That is a yoke that brings with it no burden.

What is wonderful for Saint John's is that this passage, this message of the yoke of the reign of God is always before us. The inscription on our baptismal font, crafted by a skilled woodworker, comes from the King James version and it says "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of Me."

Our invitation to apprentice with Jesus, who Himself apprenticed with God, is always there before us. When ever we are ready, when ever we wish to loose the burden of the yoke of government and of worldly concerns, Jesus is there waiting for us, and will show us the way, the truth, and the light.

Come, seek Christ, for His yoke is easy, His burden is light.

Amen,