

The Yoke's on Us

Matthew 11:28-30

Sunday, July 5, 2020—Aledo UMC

Pastor Dave Schultz

²⁸ “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

This is my first sermon as pastor of Aledo United Methodist Church. I'm told that when a pastor preaches his or her first sermon in a new appointment, that she or he should avoid controversial topics. "Just preach a nice, uplifting sermon." Well, I have a different way of looking at the world, so, of course, I decided that for my first sermon in Aledo that I would preach on homophones.

The title of my sermon is, "The Yoke's on Us." Yoke, of course, is a homophone: when I gave the title of my sermon to Debbie Swank for our virtual bulletin, she started to write y-o-l-k, as in the yolk of an egg. But I said, "No, it's y-o-k-e," which is what Jesus describes in Matthew 11.

Yolk and yoke are homophones: they're two completely different words with different spellings, but they're pronounced the same exact way. That makes them homophones.

I have no intention of talking about yolks any more today. Instead, I do want to talk about something that is much more important: I want to talk about yokes. And in doing so, I want to focus on the invitation of Jesus Christ in verses 28 through 30. It is one of the most open and comforting invitations that you'll find in the gospels. But to whom is this invitation directed?

It's not to the strong, though the strong are not excluded.

It's not to the wealthy, though the wealthy are not excluded.

It's not to the wise, though the wise are not excluded.

Rather, it's an invitation to those who are struggling; to those who are carrying heavy burdens.

Jesus was aware that the Jews of his day lived in a very unjust society. The people were oppressed by Rome, and the oppression could be quite capricious. If a Roman soldier was tired of carrying his equipment, he could commandeer you to carry it for him, taking you a mile out of your way. It was a practice that provoked outrage among the people.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the only source of oppression under which the people suffered. They also suffered under the religious oppression of the religious elite of their day. For they interpreted the Law so harshly that no one could possibly live up to their standards; yet they themselves somehow found a way to exempt themselves. It was a form of spiritual abuse and Jesus came to liberate them from spiritual abuse.

"Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest," Jesus says. I'm saying that in the present tense, because Jesus is still extending that invitation to us today. What has you burdened down today? "Cast your cares upon him, because he cares for you."

"Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." *Rest* is one of those potent Hebrew words. And there's a certain irony to its appearance in this invitation. In Hebrews 3 and 4, *God's rest* refers to the Promised Land. In Christ's invitation, there is a future promise, but there is also the promise of a present reality.

But like so many ideas in scripture, *rest* has more than one meaning. Not only does it refer to the Promised Land; it also refers to the Sabbath. And the irony is that the religious elite of Jesus' day had so misconstrued the Sabbath that it was anything but a day of rest. Instead, it had become the most burdensome day of the week for the people. They had to count their steps to make sure they didn't walk too far and thus violate the capricious rules for keeping Sabbath.

But Jesus says to us, "Come unto me. I will not add to your struggles." I will not add weight to your burdens. I will give you rest."

True religion is not about keeping rules. Rather, true religion is about a relationship with the One who created us and who died to redeem us. True religion is being connected to Christ. But how are we to be connected to Christ? By taking his yoke upon us, knowing that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

A yoke is an image from agriculture: two animals are joined together for a specific task or, you might even say, for a specific journey. Now here's the question: If a yoke is meant for two, and if I'm to take his yoke upon me, then who's on the other side of the yoke?

Now if you forget everything else I've said today, remember this: *Jesus is on the other side of the yoke.*

That means that the invitation of Christ is an invitation to be literally connected to Christ by way of his yoke. I'm on one side; Jesus is on the other. Jesus goes with me as I go about my daily tasks. Jesus goes with me as I journey through this life. The yoke's on Jesus and me; the yoke's on us, praise the Lord!

The mission statement of Aledo United Methodist Church is: *We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ.* That's yoke-talk. But let me break that mission statement down for you:

We: that's a corporate word; it refers to the entire church community. We're different people, distinct from one another. Yet on this point we are all of the same mind.

We exist: we are. we're alive, "for in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

...to connect: Think of any device you have which relies on electrical power. If you don't plug it in or recharge it, it will die. And if we aren't connected to our Creator Savior, we too will die.

A yoke is a connectional tool, one of the earliest connectional devices in human history. And taking on a yoke prevents us from wandering off by ourselves.

We exist to connect people: Aledo UMC includes some lovely facilities. But "the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple. The church is not a resting place, the church is a *people*."

We minister to people, not pews or carpets. Carpets make lousy parishioners. Carpets don't give in the offering. They don't teach Sunday school classes. They don't invite their friends to church. And they don't make rhubarb pies for church potlucks!

We exist to connect people to Jesus Christ. Why? Because he's our Creator. He's our Savior. And he's on the other side of the yoke.

It's Independence Day weekend. I love the fact that our country was founded on freedom. But freedom does not mean that I am a personally independent being. And while it is absolutely true that Jesus said, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). But true freedom is to be found when we are connected to Christ. In other words, true freedom can only be found in the yoke of Christ.

Once we take on our yoke, Jesus invites us to learn from him. I wonder, what might we learn from Jesus? We just might learn how to love God and how to love neighbor. We just might learn how to serve God and how to serve neighbor. That's part of what it means to be yoked to Christ. But loving God and serving God are not burdensome. Likewise, loving neighbor and serving neighbor is not burdensome. Walking with Jesus is never a burden. When we walk with Jesus, we walk in freedom. But it's the blessed freedom of his yoke. And when his yoke's on us, then, and only then, are we truly free.