

**July 9, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church - 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**

**Rev. Elizabeth Molitors**

*“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.”  
Matthew 11:28-30*

Every week, our deacon, Linda, stands in the middle of the aisle, reads a portion of John or Matthew, Luke or Mark, and then holds up this red book [*the gospel book*] and declares that what she just read is the gospel – the Good News – of Jesus Christ.

How, exactly, are we defining “good”?

Because here is just a sampling of some of that “Good News” from the past few weeks, in the words of Jesus:

- Do not fear those who kill the body
- Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
- I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother,
- Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me
- Whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me
- I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves
- They will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me
- Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death

And, for good measure,

☐ And you will be hated by all because of my name.

Swords, death, wolves, hate: yes, this is the *Good News* of Jesus Christ.

Ever since Pentecost Sunday, when the disciples got all “fired up” - with Holy Spirit inspiration and different languages to be able to reach *everybody* in the world with the teachings of Jesus – ever since that rousing send-off of the first gospel proclaimers, the current-day lectionary folks (the people who select and lay out our sequence of readings), they have worked hard to go back and comb through Jesus' teachings and tease out the details of what it's going to take to be a follower of Jesus, spreading his Good News.

Based on the excerpts I read a moment ago, the bottom line is: it's hard.

And this week was starting to shape up as another tough gospel reading; the beginning of the passage is Jesus talking to the crowd about John the Baptist, who was in prison, awaiting death, for having rubbed a whole lot of people the wrong way. Yay! More Good News!

But then, finally, we get to that one line that makes us breathe out a sigh of relief. Like arriving at an unexpected park bench after an arduous hike, or finding a water fountain on a hot and humid day: *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.* A Jesus oasis, appearing out of nowhere. It seems, almost, enough to make you forget all the difficult stuff that Jesus was talking about before. It seems, almost, too easy. It seems, almost, like magic.

Come to me....and I will give you rest.

But just as good news isn't always what you expect it might be, neither, too, is magic.

This week, I heard an interview with Teller, the usually silent member of the magic team, Penn and Teller. Teller spoke extensively about the process he went through to develop and practice one of the magic tricks he currently does in their show, an illusion he adapted from an instructional book on magic from the 1930s. The trick involves a red ball – like a kid's playground ball – that floats around the stage and responds to Teller's instructions, his whistles and hand signals. The ball acts almost like a trained dog, jumping through hoops, following at Teller's heels.

At the very end of the act, *Penn* comes out on stage, and does something that flies in the face of the implied, if not explicit, magicians' code of conduct: he deliberately destroys the illusion, and reveals the secret of the trick. Taking the red ball from Teller, Penn dangles it in front of the audience, and by now you understand that there's a string or a thread that's been controlling the ball. And if that's *not* yet obvious to you, Penn whips out a pair of scissors, snips the string, and the ball drops and rolls away, subject now only to the very real laws of physics.

But here's the thing: you may have always assumed that, as an audience member, that *much*, if not all, of the delight in any magic trick comes from *not knowing*, from suspending one's logic and reason for the sake of enjoyment. Yet if you watch this particular trick again, even after knowing the mechanics of how it's done, I can almost guarantee you, you'll still be amazed, still be delighted, still be astonished.

So now, like Penn, I'm going to reveal to you the secret: the truth behind the seeming magic of the marvelous, restful oasis that Jesus promises. It's not about Jesus snapping his divinely powerful fingers or doing some tricky sleight of hand. Jesus' secret is as real as the string that holds up Teller's red ball.

It's the yoke.

As in, *Take my yoke upon you. My yoke is easy.*

We're not, most of us anyway, agrarian folk, and so Jesus' invocation of a farming tool as imagery for ease and rest may not much resonate with us. We've probably seen yokes, in pictures anyway, and they look bulky, at best, and heavy, at worst. Maybe not too bad if you're an oxen or a draught horse, but for you or me, putting a yoke on – even a light one – would only seem to add to the weight of whatever other burdens we're carrying around. So, what's so easy about a yoke? Where's the rest?

Let me share with you the testimony of a gardener, talking about a time before she'd had a chance to dig a well to supply the water for seedlings growing in her greenhouse, which necessitated her hauling water, several times a day, from a pond, 139 steps away. She contrasts the experience of carrying water without a yoke – what she calls a low-tech anti-gravity device – and with one:

*Pick up the buckets without it, and the weight cuts into your fingers (especially after the little plastic handles inevitably break, and you are holding onto a wire). At the same time you feel an immediate and painful elongation of of your shoulder and elbow joints, which you know can not be good. Proper posture? Forget about it! And adding insult to injury — each step knocks a bucket against your shins.*

*OR, step between two buckets, bend forward, fit the yoke onto your shoulders, then straighten up, and you are carrying the same weight. But, somehow, dividing it between your shoulders and your hands makes the pails seem to almost float; even as you register their weight, you feel removed from it.*

*That said, it is easier, but not actually lighter.* <https://digginginthedriftless.com/2010/09/14/hauling-my-water-with-a-yoke/>

Maybe you've had an experience in your life where you felt burdened and overwhelmed by some circumstance – illness or worry, grief or uncertainty – and then something happened, and, as if by magic, whatever it was didn't seem quite so heavy anymore. In reality, the weight of the circumstance may still have been there; you were just carrying it differently.

What happened? You stumbled into a Jesus oasis: somehow, somewhere, you picked up a yoke.

Maybe it was the yoke of prayer or the yoke of quiet contemplation that led to a change in perspective or a feeling of calm.

Maybe you took on the yoke of awe, of understanding yourself in the context of the magnitude and mystery of the universe, and the problem you'd been carrying right-sized itself.

Or perhaps it was the yoke of gratitude, and you found in the weight you carried, gifts you hadn't noticed before.

As the word “yoke” is derived from the verb to join or to unite, you shouldn't be surprised to find that your yoke may have come by means of another person – God does some of God's best work through us – someone who yoked themselves to you, to help you carry whatever burden it was you were hauling around. Yokes often look just like love, empathy, justice or solidarity. (Like choir members wearing hats in support of one of their own whose cancer treatment necessitates a hat right now.)

And if you're at the point where you don't have the wherewithal to go one step further with whatever it is you're carrying, you may find that relief comes, paradoxically, in gifts of vulnerability and humility, and asking for some help, rather than redoubling your efforts to suck it up and go it alone.

Before my mom's most recent medical emergency – she took a bad fall over the Christmas holiday – my siblings and I were in the habit of checking in with my folks only once a month or so. No news was good news; they were doing just fine as they were.

But after mom fell, a bunch of other things began to fall apart, as well, and the burdens piled up for my dad. Hospitalizations, rehab, more doctors and more nurses and home health care and then a confirming diagnosis of Alzheimer's. We kids asked my dad, somewhat cautiously, if he'd like for us to call and visit more often. I say cautiously because we were raised to haul our own buckets by hand, to redouble efforts when weariness sets in, to dig deep and find extra strength, solo. Asking for yoke help isn't a strong suit for my family.

And yet, practices that started out of necessity – in a time of crisis – have

continued even though the immediate crisis is past. Calls and visits don't change the reality: it doesn't make my mom not have Alzheimer's anymore, it doesn't mean that my dad never gets frustrated with the challenges and changes in their lives, but to my eyes, he carries the weight differently. Knowing in small, tangible ways that we're there to support and help and listen and be empathic is a yoke, and it provides some measure of rest.

All these yokes – prayer and gratitude, love and empathy, solidarity and humility – they're not special tricks or illusions known only to a few select, highly trained magicians, but are abundant, limitless gifts and blessings made available by God, to be embodied and enlivened by anyone who chooses to take them on. Delightful, astonishing sources of comfort and ease, in service of all who are weighed down, in need of a sacred oasis.

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

Good news, indeed. *Amen.*