

sermon-7/6/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Jesus’ Yoke is Easy, But. . .”
Matt. 11:16-19, 25-30

Right about now, we can use some good news. News about the economy and gas prices just seems to get grimmer by the day. Any more, the local news is filled with crime reports, people abusing animals, and tragic fires. Even the sports news is depressing. The Mariners stink and the Sonics are past history.

So when we come to our Matthew text and hear, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. . .for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,” I think to myself, “That’s more like it.” Those words have been a healing salve for countless folks down through the years.

Yet, we know it is not quite that simple. We can’t help but remember other words out of the mouth of Jesus that don’t sound so restful. “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” “Take up your cross and follow me.” And then there are those frightening words about the coming persecution Christians will suffer in Matthew ten right before our chapter for today. Those words don’t sound like rest for the weary. What are we to make of this?

Any talk about rest from our burdens must be seen in the context of a prior choice. In fact, our being able to find rest is dependent on what we give our highest allegiance. Many in our culture are restless because they have not committed themselves to anything bigger than themselves and their own happiness. Their lives are consumed by trying to meet their needs. They can’t find rest because those needs are insatiable.

At the heart of the gospels is an invitation to commit ourselves to something bigger than our own needs. It is an invitation to commit ourselves to the way of life Jesus mapped out in his own life. It is an invitation to commit ourselves to a relationship with the ultimate reality in life we call God, the God we see so clearly in Jesus. It is an invitation to be in a relationship with God that is characterized by a deep intimacy demonstrated by how Jesus related to God expressed in a parental metaphor.

People in Jesus’ day had a tough time making such a commitment. When they experienced prophets, they always seemed to have excuses as to why they did not like them. That was true for John the Baptist and Jesus. Jesus put it this way, “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon;’ the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”

John represents those prophets who choose a life of ascetic discipline. Such a life carried some pretty harsh demands. John did not talk nice. He called a spade a spade. He didn’t care who you were. His prophetic style offended folks. He spoke truth to power and let the consequences fall where they would.

People in his day were attracted to him and his words. They flocked to the wilderness to be baptized by him, but they finally did not want to go there. Who needed that kind of radical lifestyle? Who wanted to dine on locusts and wild honey? Finally, many just said he was crazy. They said he had a demon. Nice excuse.

Then there was Jesus. Jesus seemed to make no distinctions between rich or poor. He hung out with the wrong people. He liked a good party. He acted as if people's needs were more important than religious laws and playing it safe. He was prophetic, like John, but he presented those prophetic words in a little different package.

People were attracted to his personality, his story-telling, his exuberance, but finally they rejected him as well. They called him a drunkard and a glutton. Those words don't sound like compliments in our day, to be sure. But, in his day, they were an incredible condemnation.

Deuteronomy 21 says when parents are fed up with their rebellious sons they are to take them to the elders. "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."

Basically that is what the people of Jesus' day were saying about him. He ought to be stoned to death. They even tried to do it on one occasion. Once again they had a nice excuse not to follow Jesus' example.

Jesus says, in essence, fish or cut bait. Enough of your excuses. You can't remain neutral all your life, afraid to make a commitment. And when you do make a commitment, you will find a deep sense of peace.

Herb O'Driscoll says that is part of what Jesus meant by finding rest for our weary souls. Once we accept the yoke of discipleship, there will be a great sense of relief that we have finally made a decision as to what we will give our ultimate allegiance. All else will begin to fall into place.

Of course, once we make a commitment, the hard work of being faithful to that commitment will follow. In a world where cruelty, greed and an insatiable need for power exists, the work of being faithful is seldom easy.

Yet, somehow this work will not feel like a burden. Jesus calls us into a gracious relationship. The Pharisees called people into a legalistic observance of the law. Jesus said a humble receptiveness opens us to revelation from God. The Pharisees' pride prevented them from hearing anything new.

Listen again to 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." That is an invitation we face each day when we awake to a world filled with bad news.

As we take communion this day, may we commit ourselves to follow the way of the one who lived exuberantly. It is making that choice that we open ourselves to the rest promised in our scripture for today. As we come to his table, may we be nourished by this symbolic meal, nourished to do the hard work of being faithful to our commitment to be his disciple. Amen