

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 5, 2020

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

Ask people what it means to follow Jesus and they'll likely say that it means living in accordance with his teachings. This is a pretty good answer. Jesus's teachings, we believe, are not entirely bound up in their time and place but can help us love God and our neighbors two millennia later.

Except that when you read Jesus's teachings, you find that they actually do have a particular cultural context to them. They are mostly about life in first-century agrarian communities. When Jesus teaches, he uses the things around him as metaphors and images to explain the kingdom of God. Which is why we end up with parables about growing seeds, secure sparrows, lost sheep, and leavened bread. This isn't necessarily bad, but it means that we have to do a little bit of imaginative thinking to understand Jesus's point.

And yokes are no different. Because Jesus probably worked as a carpenter for much of his life, he spent a lot of time building things like yokes. And most of us have some mental image of what a yoke is, but few of us have ever used one for its intended purpose. In Jesus's agrarian context, if you're going to farm or pull supplies with any efficiency, you need to use a yoke on your animals. Yokes provide order and direction. But if you've ever held a yoke you know that they can be really heavy. And if yokes get heavy enough, at some point the thing that is meant to provide order and direction keeps you from moving at all.

Many people think that Jesus's "yoke" is his reading of Torah. And so they interpret Jesus's words here as contrasting his understanding of Jewish law to the Pharisees' understanding of Jewish law. The Pharisees have a strict interpretation of Torah, a heavy yoke, and Jesus has an easy interpretation of Torah, a light yoke. This way of reading the story overstates how burdensome first-century Judaism was (not particularly), but it also tricks us into thinking that we don't have any yokes that way us down. Which is a long way from the truth.

We often hear that the defining feature of American life right now is that we are polarized and anxious. And there's probably some truth to that. But more and more it seems like the defining experience we have is that we are really tired. Not tired like *I need to catch up on sleep* tired. But more like *I'm just so worn down* tired.

I know many of our parents feel that way. Before the pandemic, there was a period of the day when all you had to do was be a stellar employee. But now you have to be a stellar employee and teacher of the year and just when you get okay at that, you have to be a camp director, chef, child psychologist, and infectious disease specialist, too. And not only are you exhausted at the prospect of getting through the day, but you have to wonder why your neighbors seem to be holding it together so well while you're reenacting *Lord of the Flies*.

Those of us who are fortunate to still have jobs might feel like we never leave work at all now. After all, you could always be doing more and proving your value. We dread the feeling that we're falling behind and right as we sit down to have dinner at the end of the day, there's another phone call or, God forbid, another email to deal with. In her book *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, Tish Harrison Warren remarks that whenever she dies her headstone will have three numbers on it. The year she was born, the year she died, and the number of unread emails in her inbox.

And kids know the same thing. That it isn't good enough to just be smart and care about service. You need to be smart and care about others in ways that other people might find interesting. It isn't good enough to just volunteer at a local food bank or soup kitchen, your service has to be interesting enough to make you stand out. Serving underprivileged kids in Bergen County is pretty boring, but serving underprivileged kids in Burkina Faso? Now you're talking.

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And it gets even worse because we look to others for a sense of affirmation. That we're doing well enough. That we're being accepted. That we are doing things the right way. Bragging about your income or your house or your vacation is tacky. But the real status symbol, the thing that's fun to brag about, is being busy. Because it makes us feel like we're needed by other people.

No wonder we feel worn down, burned out, just so tired. So often, the message we hear from the world is that we're not enough. We're not working hard enough. We're not parenting well enough. We're not smart enough. We're not caring enough. And our response is to just go at the same problem even harder. To try to prove ourselves even more. To take on another yoke, another way to demonstrate that we actually do have it altogether.

Maybe nothing I just said resonates with you at all. You don't find life overwhelming and you don't feel tired and you don't feel a kind of clawing sense that you're going to get found out. And if that's true, then good for you. And you can ignore the last three minutes of this.

But I would guess that lots of us do feel some of that weariness. And it's to people like us, people who feel worn down, that Jesus offers us something different. A different kind of yoke. A different way of being and living in the world. By giving up all of the yokes we use to make ourselves feel busy and needed and important.

Jesus says, "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." The words Jesus speaks here, rest, easy, light, etc. make it sound like discipleship is just lazing around. But that's not what Jesus is getting at. The word for "easy" here is something more like "good." And the word for "rest" is more like "refreshment" or "recovery." Discipleship as Jesus talks about it is not easy. Jesus often says that it's quite difficult. But Jesus does tell us that it is a worthy calling that is within our ability. Will we fail? Yea, of course. Everybody messes up. Jesus doesn't promise that we won't fail. What he does promise is that our failures don't make our calling less noble or our lives less valuable.

How might it change our lives if instead of trying to build out a life, instead of trying to prove ourselves again and again and always falling short according to some arbitrary standard, we learned to accept the order, the way of life, the yoke that Jesus gives us? I would guess quite a bit.

That doesn't mean abandoning all of our responsibilities. It doesn't mean giving up on our families, our communities, and our relationships. But it does mean giving ourselves the same grace that we show to other people.

If you're a parent who feels like you're constantly messing up, it's not because you're a bad parent. It's because you're trying to do the work of three people during the worst public health crisis in a generation. If you're an employee, it might mean appreciating that your work is not your life. There are other things you can build your identity around besides the thing that pays the bills. And if you're a student, it might mean recognizing that the most worthwhile things about you will never be reflected in a GPA or an acceptance letter.

That new way of living might not be easy. It's hard to give up our sense of being needed. It's hard to give up the dopamine shot we get when we're told that we did a good job. It's hard to understand who we are without constantly needing other people's approval.

But Jesus doesn't say discipleship is easy. He only says that it's good. And that's really all that matters.

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