

## Proper 9, Pentecost VIII

### July 6, 2008

That reading from Matthew's Gospel is quite a contrast to what Jesus has been saying for the last couple of Sundays. Lately, Jesus has been talking about the cost of discipleship—the certainty of persecution, conflict, suffering and painful division for those who choose to follow him. “Leave it all behind, pick up your cross, give up your life for my sake.” Strong stuff like that.

Then, today, just a few verses later, Jesus is all sweetness and light, promising rest and comfort, light burdens and easy yokes. This is more like it. Gentle masters are much more attractive; if we must have masters at all. None the less, I want to look at these words for a while this morning. It's a little more complex than it looks.

First of all, the primary thrust of what Jesus is saying here is not directed toward people who have just any kind of difficulty. By “all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens” (I still prefer “who labor and are heavy laden”), anyway, here Jesus does not primarily mean folks with ordinary problems, like too many bills, or being unemployed, or sick, or having ungrateful kids, a hard life, or whatever. Jesus has something to say about things like this, but they are not what he is talking about here. Here, Jesus is talking quite specifically to and about those who are on a religious quest—those who are seeking God, and relationship with God. He is calling to himself the *religiously* exhausted—those who, like Paul, have tried all of the usual ways of finding some peace with the divine, and have achieved only frustration.

The real clue to this is the fact that a yoke was *the* common symbol for the law of Moses: especially for the details of the law and the minute, ever changing, demands of the legalism of the Pharisees. In fact, that's about the only allegorical way the word was used.

(Now we need to remember that here Matthew is presenting an exaggerated pictures of the Pharisees—most of them were not nearly this bad; but enough were to justify this caricature.)

This is why Jesus says that the wise and intelligent (the religious leaders), have missed the point, and then adds that only the Son, and *not* those leaders, and not you, and not anyone else—only the son knows the Father.

The yoke of the Pharisees—their demands that you have to do this and this and this exactly right in order to matter to God, in order to be a decent person, in order to be loved or counted significant—that yoke Jesus rejects—even though it was the yoke of the wise and intelligent. That yoke—the yoke of seeking God by keeping the rules, by doing what somebody (or anybody or everybody) else says is the thing to do—by trying to *get it right* all of the time and so living constantly in fear of getting it wrong; *that* yoke leads those who wear it to ‘labor and be heavy laden’. It leads to living in what Paul calls “this body of death.” It leads to a religion and a life of fearful obedience to a multitude of petty dictates in which the spirit is deadened, and where some measure of success is more likely to lead you into self-righteousness than into the heart of God.

Look: To say to your child, or to a friend, or to a spouse, or to anyone, really, that “I will only love you if you do right,” to say this is to insure a sick and twisted relationship. It’s to hurt everybody involved. To teach that God says this is not only terrible theology, it can also be devastating. Yet the yoke of the law at its worst (not at its best, but at its worst, which is what Jesus is talking about here), did just that. Those who, like Paul, struggled under such a yoke, discovered that it didn’t fit; that it did not bring them to God, and that it did not enrich their lives. Yokes like that never do.

To go scurrying about with the notion that if we could only figure out the right thing to do, the right way to act, the right words to say, the right way to do the rituals, *then* we would be all right, *then* we could conjure up God's acceptance; to do this, regardless of how fine, exulted, and useful the rules may be—to do this is to skate on the edge of magic. It is to insure frustration and exhaustion. God's presence with us, and God's love for us, are never the results of our actions. He is in charge, we are not.

In response to all of this, Jesus says "come to me." Not to a new law, not to a new teaching, not to a hidden interpretation or a legalistic loophole, not to a book or a list—but "to me"—to a person, to himself. | | Jesus is saying, "If you seek God, if you seek His love, if you seek a life that makes some sense, and a way of understanding the world that allows you to deal honestly with what happens and not be destroyed, if you want to be who you are created to be—come to me." It's a call to relationship—to relationship with Jesus and to relationship with the community that continues Jesus' life and ministry.

The alternatives, then and now, will fail. He will not. Remember today's collect, where we are reminded that God has taught us that all the commandments are kept by loving God and our neighbor. Such is the yoke of Christ. And, since it does have to do with these commandments to love, the folks who take that yoke upon themselves usually find that it is shaped very much like a cross.

One more thing, in our translation, Jesus calls that yoke "easy". Now, that's an unfortunate English word: it makes it sound like everything is a snap, that very little effort or energy is required to do it. And, as anyone who has tried to live the life of Jesus knows, that's just not true. The New English Bible's translation is better; it reads, "My yoke is good to bear". The point is not that his yoke, his call to relationship, makes no difference or asks nothing of us—quite the contrary.

The point is that it fits, it's the right size, so it works—it leads to God, and it brings with it wholeness, and a peace that can be found nowhere else.

To come to him is to discover that what was so frantically and desperately sought—life with God—is not an earned reward, but a free gift. To come to him is to discover, as Paul discovered, that “there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” To come to him is to discover that the task of getting it all correct is replaced by the absolute gift of God's grace.

All the strong stuff we have heard the past few weeks about discipleship is still there. But the yoke is good to bear. It leads to life. To submit to it is to be embraced by God's mercy, to carry it fulfills both God's will and our own deepest humanity.

We are called to a new yoke, not to a law, or a set of rules, but to a person and a community built around that person. And in these, the religious quest, the greatest search of human existence, can find its richest fulfillment, and its deepest satisfaction.

Jesus said, Come to me, if you seek God, if you seek life, I will give you rest.