

“The Yoke’s on You”

Matthew 11:16-19 and 25-30

July 6, 2014

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

I’m annoyed with myself so I need your help.

Please look at the picture of the ox yoke in the “Grace Notes” of your bulletin. Now imagine holding it. The ox yoke, I mean. It is heavy. Very heavy. And it has a big iron ring in the top to hitch it to the apparatus used to drive the ox team. The iron is heavy. If any of you have ever held an ox yoke, you know what I mean. Did I mention it was heavy?

Alert worshippers will wonder why I’m annoyed. Because when I visited my father last Sunday in Maryland, he told me he had an ox yoke in his garage. Though interested, I did not think of this message and what a great object lesson it would be. So you have to imagine it. And it is....heavy.

So what is Jesus saying with all this talk about easy yokes and light burdens? Really? It seems a contradiction in terms, like “authentic reproduction” or “jumbo shrimp” or “any high speed highway in Connecticut.”

But that’s what Jesus does. He talks about losing our lives to save them; giving away all we have to inherit eternal life; loving our neighbor when they don’t love us. He himself, as the African folk hymn “Jesu, Jesu” declares, is a “master who acts as a slave.” Jesus speaks all the time in parables, riddles and metaphors designed to make us scratch our heads.

It can be even more annoying than leaving your father’s ox yoke behind.

So what? Some of us are so stressed dealing with the heavy yokes put on us by circumstance or other people that we don’t have time for these brain-teasers, “co-ans,” “counter-intuitive images” or whatever you want to call them, pastor.

Stress. Glad you mentioned it. Yes, it’s the awkward relative at the 4th of July party that everyone tolerates because no one knows how to get away from him. Or her. But there s/he is. Not all stress is bad, as I’ve written elsewhere this morning. But it all can take its toll.

So I've put an inventory in today's bulletin, the Holmes and Rahe Stress Scale, as a way of gauging exactly how heavy your yoke might be. All of us have stress. Yawn. But sometimes it can be a bit much. I took this in 2009, the year of my divorce after 28 years of marriage, and my score was 214, which gives exposure to a moderate risk of illness due to stress. I took it again in 2012, the year I married, moved to Woodbridge, left The Council of Churches positions, started at Mary Taylor Memorial (among other exciting things) and my score was over 300, "at risk of illness" according to the inventory. The point is to be aware. And, by the way, I've put a youth stress scale in your bulletin, too. Because sometimes adults discount youth and can't imagine their problems are significant. But for youth they are. If you're not a youth, consider giving it to someone who is.

In addition to becoming more self-aware this inventory invites us to consider another thing Jesus said, not in today's scripture but scriptural nonetheless: "Love thy neighbor as thyself." It's the second great commandment, of course, in response to the seeker who wanted to know which, among 613 commandments in the Hebrew Bible, was the greatest. "Love thy neighbor as thyself."

True story: when my younger son Adam was quite little, perhaps 3 or 4, my good friend the Rev. Dr. Clayton Miller was visiting our home. As we sat around the dining room table, something in the conversation prompted Adam to look at me and say "I love Daddy" and look at his brother and say "I love Dan." Their mother said "What about me?" and Adam said "I love me too!"

Do we? Love ourselves I mean. Because if we don't it's darn hard to love our neighbors. One way to love ourselves is to get to know better this Jesus who tells us his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

Another way to love ourselves is to resort to more four-letter words. Pray. Love. Hope. Rest. Most of you have seen my July newsletter article, even if you haven't read it. I note that I am seeking to observe Sabbath more consistently—which, frankly, is easier to do in the summer time when church program slows—and part of that observance is to not read work e-mail on Fridays. It DOES make a difference. As a friend of mine with 20 years in business once said to me, "Nobody ever died with an empty 'in' box." If we want to love ourselves, each of us will find our own way to observe Sabbath and experience rest and renewal.

Another way to love ourselves is to ask ourselves "Why am I here?" In church, I mean. How did I get here? Why am I part of a church? Why am I part of THIS church? And why am I part of this church NOW?

I met this week with a team of volunteers—Maryann Petremont, Priscilla James and Paul Downing—who are working with me to plan a Leadership Day Apart. This event, endorsed unanimously by the Church Council, is set for Sept. 13th and is open to all. One of the things we discussed is how to invite new people into leadership. Motivation is key; and sometimes (especially when we are tired and discouraged ourselves) we fall into the trap of thinking we need new people to pay the bills and do the work. I don't know about you, but I have never met a person who joined the church and served in the church so they could pay bills and do work! These things are by-products of a journey that seeks meaning through a living relationship with Jesus Christ. That relationship gives us many things, among them value. As Dr. Albert Schweitzer, the great humanitarian observed, "Try not to become a person of success but rather to become a person of value."

When we discover meaning, practice Sabbath and get to know the Jesus who is the way to God, we discover that even hard work is light because we are yoked with him. Easy? That's the promise from the guy in the yoke with us. "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." The yoke's on you, but it's his. Trust that promise. Today. Amen.