

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
July 6, 2014  
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Zechariah 9:9-12  
Psalm 145:8-14  
Romans 7:21-8:6  
Matthew 11:25-30

The words of Jesus in our Gospel lesson today involve both an announcement of revelation as well as an offer of divine grace. The announcement of revelation comes in vv. 25-27, where Jesus thanks the Father for revealing the truth to those with simple faith and adds that the only path to knowing the Father is through the Son who makes him known.

The offer of divine grace comes in vv. 28-30, with words that are very familiar to many of us: “come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke fits perfectly, and the burden I give you is light.”

I want to explore Jesus’ offer of grace here, because I believe that it is possible to understand his words in several different ways.

The first way these words may be taken is by trying to understand the original historical circumstances in which Jesus spoke them, and *to whom* he spoke them.

Many New Testament scholars are of the opinion that Jesus is speaking here to people bent low beneath a heavy load of trying to live by the Mosaic Law, particularly the layers of tradition which had grown up around the Law.

And in fact, Jesus' words here sound very similar to the extra-canonical book *Ecclesiasticus*, where Wisdom is portrayed as calling out to Israel, saying, "come, take my yoke, and find for yourselves rest" (*Ecclesiasticus* 51:25-27).

No doubt this is a plausible way to read Jesus' words. For by this time upwards of 600 rules and regulations had attached themselves like barnacles to the Law, creating an impossible task for those trying to live up to its principles. As the apostle Paul tells the Romans, what originally was designed as an instrument of *life* became for many an instrument of *death*.

In a similar way, Jesus might say to us today, "If you base your salvation on doing good deeds and performing righteous works, that will eventually become an oppressive yoke to bear."

A second way in which Jesus' words might be understood is by applying them to persons who are burdened and oppressed in various ways by the trials and tests of life. Those who are troubled, tired, discouraged, depressed, beaten down. Those who are facing traumatic and difficult circumstances. Those who are taxed to the very limit of their emotional, spiritual, physical and psychological resources.

To such people, Jesus says, “come to me, and I will help you. I will lighten your load.”

This is, in fact, how I think I have always understood and read these words from Jesus. I’ve always heard Jesus saying, “Hey, has life let you down? Come to me and I’ll lift you up.”

And this understanding would also be plausible. And there are many today who hear these words and perk up their ears, saying, “those words are addressed to me. Those words have my name all over them!”

I certainly wouldn’t want to deny any of us that privilege today.

But there is another way to see these words, a way which we may not often consider. What I’ve come to believe about these words is that the rest Jesus promises here is not merely for those who are tired, discouraged, burdened, and having a hard go of it. The rest Jesus promises here is deeper than that. It addresses the fundamental human condition. I think the burdens and heavy loads to which Jesus refers here have to do with the burden of sin.

The context of Jesus’ words here in Matthew are two stories where Israel has rejected the ministries of both John the Baptist and Jesus. Such rejection is of course the height of sin, but even more compelling is today’s epistle lesson from Romans 7-8.

The Roman poet Ovid, who was just slightly older than Paul, stated: “desire persuades me one way, reason another. I see the better and approve it, but I follow the worse.” (Metamorphoses 7.19-20)

Paul said it like this: “It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong.”

Scholars are divided as to whether this material is autobiographical with respect to Paul, and equally divided as to whether this passage refers to the struggle one faces *prior to becoming a Christian* or whether it refers to the struggle one faces *while living as a Christian*.

But apart from those considerations, the text definitely shows us the tension between *willing* and *doing*. And it also shows that **through the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, the power of sin, the tyranny of sin, the dominion of sin, can be broken in our lives.**

Note chapter 8, verse 2: “for the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death.”

And again in verse 3: “God destroyed sin’s control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.”

All of this takes me back again to Jesus’ words. We’ve actually heard in recent weeks from our Gospel lessons that following Jesus can actually be quite demanding. The demands of discipleship can be stringent.

So it seems an apparent contradiction here when Jesus says, “take my yoke upon you, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

But if the promised rest here is rest from the burden of sin and not just of the demands of discipleship, this apparent contradiction loses much of its force. The promise then becomes a source of great comfort and strength, especially given the struggle depicted in Romans 7-8. After all, the greatest load a person can carry, when you think about it, is the load of sin. *There is no burden greater than being estranged from a loving God and his purposes for your life, even if you may not be able to name that burden.*

What our texts imply today is that each of us wears a yoke of some kind. None of us is autonomous. That word comes from two Greek words, “autos” and “nomos” and means literally “a law unto yourself.”

We human beings like to think of ourselves as “autonomous,” as totally free and in control. But we are not. There is no such thing as unfettered freedom, especially in Biblical thought. The fact is that another person, thing, or idea will always end up controlling our lives. If you doubt this, remember the words of that great theologian Bob Dylan, whose famous lyric says: “ya gotta serve somebody.” Or, you could simply go back and reread Romans 7-8.

Jesus’ promise is that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. In surrendering our lives to him, we discover the truth behind that paradox that to

give your life away is to truly find it. Perhaps Christian writer and teacher Elton Trueblood said it better when he said:

*We have not advanced very far in our spiritual lives if we have not encountered the basic paradox of freedom, to the effect that we are most free when we are bound. But not just any way of being bound will suffice; what matters is the character of our binding. The one who would like to be an athlete, but who is unwilling to discipline his body by regular exercise and by abstinence, is not free to excel on the field or the track. His failure to train rigorously...denies him the freedom to go over the bar at the desired height, or to run with the desired speed and endurance. With one concerted voice the giants of the devotional life apply the same principle to the whole of life with this dictum: **Discipline is the price of freedom.** (From *The New Man For Our Time*)*

Christ is not speaking about a life that is without struggle, pain or labor. He is speaking about a life of freedom from the burden of sin and its power. He is speaking about a life where you can “travel light” -- free from the kind of oppressive burdens that come from the enemy, not Jesus.

How does it happen? It happens through the power of the Holy Spirit, the One who walks along side us to guide us and give us strength.

As we come to the Table this morning, come with faith. Bring that load you've been carrying with you to Jesus. Exchange it for his yoke, his peace, his strength. Accept his grace that is designed for *your* need.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Spirit. Amen.