

Pastor Darby Lawrence
Pentecost 5, 5 July 2020

St. Thomas Lutheran Church
Bloomington, Indiana

HOLY GOSPEL

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 NRSV, emended

P: The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the eleventh chapter.

C: Glory to you, O Lord.

“To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another: ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating or 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!’ Yet, wisdom is vindicated by the deeds of her children.”

(V.25). . . At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

P: The Gospel of Our Lord!

C: Praise to you, O Christ.

Are there any more comforting words than the ones I just read?

²⁸ “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

As beloved as these words are— and they truly are some of my very favorite – check out Eugene Peterson’s rendition in The Message:

²⁸⁻³⁰ “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Man, that's what I'm talking about! I'm tired and worn out and I would love to recover my life and get some real rest! Please teach me the unforced rhythms of grace! And to live freely and lightly, man. That just all sounds heavenly to me!

But when I first came upon this rendering decades ago, the thing that tripped me up was the sentence, "Burned out on religion?" I mean, I'm a pastor, right? I'm supposed to be *for* religion. Religion is a good thing, of course, isn't it? I mean, what could be so bad about *religion*, of all things? And then I remembered the bad things about my church upbringing. All the expectations, and all the judgment that would come when the expectations of living a "holy life" were not achieved.

And all of the horror stories I've heard over nearly three decades of serving as pastor, stories of cruel words that were spoken (unintentionally hurtful or not) that cut someone to the core.

And, quite frankly, my own experiences of serving as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in several congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The church – religion – can be a cruel place. The burdens religion and any system can put upon you can be terrible. So yeah. Religion can be bad and many are rightly burned out on it.

One of the other things that struck me as "wrong" about this passage is that Jesus invites those who are weary and heavy laden; he invites us to lay this burden down and he will give us rest. But *then* he goes on to invite us to put on a yoke! A yoke?!?! That means that I'll still have a burden and I came here because my burden was too heavy and I grew weary in carrying it. Doesn't it seem that being fitted for a yoke is the exact opposite of what we need when we're completely exhausted from carrying heavy things??

But here's the thing. We are designed for something, for some purpose, for do some particular work. And there's *always* work to be done. But what if you were doing work that you were never intended to do, that you are ill-fitted for, or taking on responsibilities that were never meant for you? Yeah. That's exhausting. Jesus is offering us a better way.

If you are yoked to Christ, then you are yoked to God and God's love and purpose for creation, *all* of creation. But there are so many different aspects to this, it's hard for one person to keep track of it all. Some are called more specifically to care for the earth and all of its creatures. They have ears, eyes and hearts that are attuned to experience this aspect of creation on a deeper level than most. Others are called to care for the nurture and education of our young people. Others are called to create art that helps us see the beauty of the earth (and sometimes the pain and ugliness) through different eyes.

In his exposition on the church as the body of Christ, Paul writes extensively about the different gifts that are given, and how crucial it is for us to honor that for the healthy functioning of the entire body. In the 12th chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul writes,

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.

This list seems a bit antiquated, but you get the point. Paul also stresses that it is crucial for the different parts of the body to maintain their distinctiveness. “If the foot would say, ‘Because I am not a hand I do not belong in the body,’ that would not make it any less of a part of the body,” is one of the examples that he uses. I have been given a heart and mind for the Ministry of Word and Sacrament, but I am simply horrible at many of the other tasks necessary to support this ministry. Seriously, I’d be dead in the water if other members of the church didn’t do the things they are called to do, have been given the gifts – different gifts from mine, thank God! – to do.

In his book, Lives of a Cell, Lewis Thomas explains that within our own body there are other beings which are not, strictly speaking, us.

A good case can be made for our nonexistence as entities. We are not made up, as we had always supposed, of successively enriched packets of our own parts. We are shared, rented, occupied. At the interior of our cells, driving them, providing the oxidative energy that sends us out for the improvement of each shining day, are the mitochondria, and in a strict sense they are not ours....they have maintained themselves and their ways, replicating in their own fashion, privately, with their own DNA and RNA quite different from ours.

And we would be dead in three minutes if they ever stopped being exactly what they are, which is not us. Isn’t that lovely? Apparently, not only are there different parts to the body, parts of our body aren’t even us. That’s how it works. Even the leaves in the trees behind me, all green and producing oxygen for us, are dependent upon chlorophyll, which is not, strictly speaking, them. We are yoked with other beings in our bodies with creatures who have different DNA than us. And thank God for that or we couldn’t even digest food or respire.

Since we are yoked to Christ, we are yoked to each other as well, completely dependent upon each other.

When I was in my second call at St. Peter’s, in Emden, Illinois, I had revamped the confirmation program. It was a good program but not very organized which, as you can imagine, was disconcerting to many people. One day two women approached me and asked if they could help me organize the program a bit. I asked them if they would enjoy

doing that, to which they replied, "Yes." I almost wept as I told them, "Yes! I would LOVE it if you'd help get this organized!" They put together a nice file folder for each student, with all the material they would need for the year in each folder, then put them in alphabetical order in a nice box. It was marvelous and everyone was then quite happy with the program. I thanked them profusely for the work they did, in particular how they made me look better and smarter than I really am!

In 2006 I submitted my pastor's profile to the SE Minnesota Synod. In looking at churches seeking a pastor, I saw one that I thought I might be a good fit for. I sent an email to the office manager asking if it would be possible for them to give them my name. A couple of days later I received word that the bishop didn't think this would be a good fit for me. So I called the bishop and left a message, wondering what the deal was. He called me the next day and explained why. I was coming out of a highly conflicted congregation and the church I had asked about was in the midst of serious conflict as well. I told him that I liked the way he thinks.

We then talked about the life of a pastor and how difficult it can be in the midst of conflict. Then he said something that I've always remembered. "Darby," he said, "ministry *can* be a joy." Huh. In the midst of my current situation at that time, I had completely forgotten that. Ministry *can* be a joy. I think it's actually *supposed* to be a joy. And I think it has everything to do with what Jesus is saying today.

When he says that the yoke he gives us is "easy," the Greek word used indicates that it is fitted specifically for you. Like it's the yoke you were always intended to have, as well as the load you were intended to pull. It fits you; it suits you; it's what you were meant to do.

A long time ago I noticed that almost any time a professional black singer was asked where they got their start, they would always answer that it was in church. Their church had noticed that they were good singers and provided the encouragement, direction and training they needed in order to be successful in that field. Then I began to notice that so many of the black political leaders happened to be "The Reverend" so and so. They, too, had been nurtured by a community of faith that saw their gifts in that area, helped them to realize it as well, and provided the nurture and encouragement for them to be successful in that field. The church helped them find the vocation that "fit" them, the yoke that was "easy."

Part of the function of a healthy body is when it works together in this way to help build up each of the different parts of the body.

As interesting as all this may be, as I was sharing all of this with a fellow pastor, he said, "But Darby, where's the good news in all of this?" Fair enough.

I guess I'd start with the bad news, which is that I hardly know anyone who isn't weary and carrying heavy loads. It seems like everyone I know is exhausted with how life has

become, as if it weren't bad enough before COVID. And the heavy burdens forced upon us by the systems we have created is enough to crush a person or a people. One of the things that has become even more clear through this pandemic is the disproportional way it is affecting People of Color. One more way our systems work better for some people than others. It's absolutely exhausting.

And then there are the forces that oppose any real change to the systems we have created. Some of them are from powerful people who benefit from the current situation, but the most insidious forces that oppose change lie within our own hearts. There is much work to be done, my friends, and the weight of it can become completely overwhelming.

I remember seeing a cartoon in college that had hundreds of people gathered together, each of them with a thought bubble that said, "But what can one person do?" (And one cute little dog with a thought bubble that said, "But what can one dog do?") And therein lies the first bit of good news. We are not just one person! We have been yoked to so very many others who have been yoked to the same spirit and the same loving purpose! And they're all so very different from each other, with different perspectives and different gifts to offer. This is the gift of the body of Christ. But we all march to the same tunes that point us to the same goals that Christ embodies. So let us rejoice in the fact that God delights in diversity! He certainly made enough of it!

But wait! There's more! The burden that you will bear throughout all of this is the part of the burden you were made to do. As Eugene Peterson puts it, "I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." When you're doing what God made you for, things get a whole lot easier, that's for sure. Even when the work is grueling and powerful forces oppose your work, knowing that you're doing what you're supposed to be doing makes the burden lighter. And knowing that you are never working alone makes the burden lighter still

The other part of the good news this morning is that you are yoked not only with every other part of the body of Christ, you are first yoked with Jesus Christ, the Son of God. That's a pretty powerful yoke partner! And if you are doing the work of Christ, Jesus is always pulling with you. How cool is that!

There most certainly is work to do and burdens to bear, but we are promised that the burden that God gives to us is the one we are supposed to carry. In order to do the work God has given each of us, we have been yoked together in one Body so that, together, we can accomplish that to which God has called us to do.

You've got this, folks! And remember the great cloud of witnesses cheering you on and pulling with you, including our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.