

PROPER NINE, PENTECOST SIX, YEAR A, JULY 9, 2023

Jesus' invitation in today's Gospel may be one of the most comforting passages in scripture: "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." However, I like Eugene Peterson's translation in the Message better because I believe it gets to the heart of this invitation. His paraphrase goes like this:

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

This translation is even more beautiful in its simplicity. In Jesus' invitation he presumes that all of us who come to him are tired, worn out, burned out yet he promises rest to us if we come and learn from him. What does he mean when he says keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly? Let me tell you two stories.

There was a man who was raised in a devout family and George had been a faithful churchgoer. When he reached college, though, something changed. Some of the rules he had grown up with no longer made sense to him. He wanted to start on a spiritual search yet was told he must believe unquestioningly and without doubt. So he gradually became a skeptic and a cynic. As time went on, other interests, such as his work, took priority. His own list of demands and expectations took the form of being the best he could be in his field and earning enough to keep his family at a high standard of living.

To his family and friends, George lacked nothing; he had a lovely home, a loving family, a prestigious job. But inside, he too was tired, burdened by an emptiness that nothing seemed to fill, worn down by a weariness that nothing seemed to relieve.

And Jesus invitation says: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

The second story is about a woman named Betty who felt she could never be good enough. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't live up to the expectations of her parents, her grandparents, her husband, her children, her peers. Their demands seemed endless. At times she had to admit that it was hard to know whether the expectations were theirs or her own; the lines of distinction were no longer clear.

But what really caused her pain was the feeling that she could never live up to God's expectations. She was a faithful worshiper and an active Sunday school teacher. The church had always been a large part of her life. Yet somehow, her efforts never seemed adequate in terms of pleasing God, saving herself or being loved for who she was.

To her family and friends she was the epitome of organization, thoughtfulness and faithfulness. But on the inside, she was tired to the point of exhaustion, weighed down by the yoke of expectations she bore.

And Jesus said, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

George and Betty, our two fictional yet very real characters are us. Each one remains enslaved, burdened and weighed down by their various expectations and so are we. For somewhere in most of our stories is also an enslavement, a set of

demands and expectations that promises to save us but instead spells endless weariness. There is the burden of just keeping afloat of our bills, or maintaining a job, or keeping healthy. And there is also the burden of guilt, anxiety, and fear. All these things make us sometimes frazzled and overwhelmed not knowing where to turn or what to do next with the list of things that is longer than our arms. But life's greatest burden is not having too much to do. Some of the happiest people around are the busiest. We burn out not from too much to do but from constant engagement with the trivial and inconsequential things that fill up our lives. And Jesus says to us, "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"

This leads to the second half of what Jesus said in today's Gospel about taking on his yoke. It seems odd to say in one sentence, "Come unto me and I will give you rest" and in the next to say, "Take my yoke." So we need to understand what Jesus means by taking his yoke.

Now none of us would say we want to be yoked to anything. We don't want to be controlled. We are free agents, we are in charge, we decide our own destiny. Well, that is true but only up to a point. The fact is we are all yoked to all kinds of things. We might be yoked to either a mortgage, to expectations, to health concerns, to what people think of us and to all kinds of things. The real question is, to what or to whom do we really want to be yoked with?

In Jesus' day, yokes were made for oxen. They would be custom-made for each animal, shaped to the curb of the animal's neck for maximum comfort. Oxen were yoked together to pull a weight, however, the design of the yoke distributed the weight evenly so the oxen could do more than what they could do individually.

To take on Jesus' yoke means to know that Jesus is with us through the difficulties of life. Jesus' yoke is not a yoke of servitude or bondage, but a tool of connection, a way of being in relationship with God that makes our work easier, not more difficult.

Being yoked to Jesus means that we are loved unconditionally by a compassionate God that shows unlimited mercy and grace. Being yoked to Jesus helps us to discern what is worthwhile, what is needed, what is important. It's about recognizing that we are all children of God and so we too, with Jesus, are called to strive for justice and peace and promote the dignity of all human beings. That is the revolutionary call of Christ to us and what makes our burden light is when we extend ourselves to promote God's love and mercy to everyone.

When we were marked with the cross on our foreheads in baptism, a new yoke was offered. The yoke of Christ doesn't wear us down. The yoke of Christ frees us for life and love and acts of justice. The yoke of Christ demands only our openness and our acceptance of what has first been given us. So when we hear these words, "Come to me all that are weary and I will give you rest" may we hear the words of Jesus not as another demand but as the invitation to life lived abundantly under the sign of the cross.

So you see, Come unto me is an invitation to surrender our freedom--from selfishness to sharing; from maintaining walls that divide to creating whole communities based on justice, love and cooperation; from hoarding our possessions to healing the breach between us; from hopeless bewilderment to wonderful hope in believing in God's grace and each other.

We have been given a liberating hope through the life of Jesus Christ. "Come unto me," calls us to realize there is plenty of God's love and enough justice for all and when we practice it the spirit of God's compassion will reign. So this morning, let us enrich our understanding of being yoked with Christ and by God's grace, may we become Christ's people who also say, Come unto me and I will give you rest. Amen.