

5<sup>th</sup> Pentecost  
July 9, 2017

## Take My Yoke Upon You

*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.*

Good morning and welcome to St. ABAC. Yes, I know we are gathered in community this morning in the incomparable St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Tifton, Georgia, but today's gospel has led me to honor another important saint—the most venerable St. ABAC—patron of our beloved local agricultural college, which happens to be the employer and educational institution for many of our church community, and source of all agricultural knowledge for a city-bred kid like me. I find myself appealing to St. ABAC for background knowledge that sometimes becomes necessary for me to understand and preach on the Holy Scriptures.

Today we are offered some of the most familiar and beloved words uttered by Jesus—*my yoke is easy and my burden is light*. Though you might recall with irony that just two weeks ago—and one chapter earlier in the gospel of Matthew—we heard Jesus saying, *do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword*. Now I understand that every Sunday morning we make the effort, to get up, get dressed and come together with family or friends, or sometimes just by ourselves, because we know our lives are empty and incomplete without the work of God and the love of Jesus Christ in them. But *which* Jesus are we talking about, the Jesus who comes with a sword, or the Jesus who says *come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest*?

And here is where I turned to St. ABAC, for all my unanswered questions related to agriculture. What do I know about yokes, except for egg yolks, that is? What makes a yoke easy or a burden light? My only frame of reference for this would be grainy black and white photographs from a bygone era showing 2 oxen pulling a plow held by a skinny overall-wearing farmer following behind in furrows of overturned dirt. What is an ox, anyway—some kind of cow, right? Why do you always see *two* oxen, and is that better than one mule, and how do you get those enormous animals to get into that large

wooden yoke that holds them together but doesn't necessarily make them do anyone's bidding? And when did the tractor take over making the sight of yoked oxen obsolete around our first world farms? I have heard that tractors are so sophisticated and computer driven now that it takes a certain kind of tech specialist to work on them. So if agriculture has progressed past the place where yoked oxen have become only a curiosity at museums of agriculture, where does one go to find out anything about them? **You Tube** of course! There are *actually You Tube* videos showing you how to train oxen, which FYI, are steers (boy cows) who have had their anatomy altered to make them more compliant with their training. The idea is that you start them off young—when they are just calves—leading them around the barnyard in a halter and letting them learn to work together in little yokes, then you gradually increase the size of the yoke as the animals grow bigger. If trained right, they function together as a team under voice command of the trainer, who needs to be clearly in charge at all times. The yoked oxen can accomplish a lot, pulling tremendous amounts of weight, if they are treated well, trained well, and know and follow the voice of the humans who direct and care for them. And before I go any further with this metaphor, I learned that not only oxen, but steers and cows can be trained to pull in a yoke, too, as well as horses and mules, if you know what you are doing.

Now you might be thinking (especially in these trying times) that regardless of the message that Jesus is trying to deliver in today's gospel, we humans are just not made to allow ourselves to be yoked one to another to serve *any* common purpose. We are born with intelligence, and ingenuity and strong wills, and if there is work to be done—work that befits our own ends or even work *we* believe will benefit the Kingdom of God—we can pretty much figure out what to do and then do it ourselves. We value our freedom, our independence, our individual power, our own point of view, and our desire to go where we want, when we want, and to do what we want, as long as we remind ourselves of the Golden Rule once in a while. If you give us the rules, we can agree to play fair—most of the time—and we expect others to do the same. Being involuntarily yoked to another would never come into our definition of *easy*.

And what about the burden of life as we know it? Most of us, if we admit it, can certainly identify with being weary and heavy laden. Jesus described this feeling well—for his time and for ours. He was speaking in Matthew's gospel of that familiar feeling

*that sometimes, you just can't win.* Using the example of John the Baptist—who was being accused of having a demon because he acted a little out of the box: dressing funny, living in the desert on an unusual diet, and preaching the forgiveness of sins—he pointed out that John *followed the law* and was certainly not caught in the common sins of civilization and was still criticized. On the other hand, Jesus was seen merely eating and drinking with those considered the sinners of his time—prostitutes and tax collectors—and was therefore accused of drunkenness and gluttony. What Jesus was trying to say was that if you try to follow the rules of the world, you can never win. No amount of personal intelligence, physical attractiveness, independence, ingenuity or good intentions will ever be enough to either please the world, or bring success in the world. No matter how hard we try on our own to be as good as we can, as productive as we can, or as persistent as we can, it will never be enough. If we insist on playing by the world's rules, we will never get the field plowed and ready for planting. It is no wonder that we feel weary carrying our heavy burdens all the time—it is just too much. Nothing we manage to do ever seems enough.

Jesus was pretty astute to understand this frustrating principle of human interaction in his time. And not much has changed, really. As hard as we try doing the same thing over and over expecting different results, we can identify with Paul who wrote, *I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.* We are burdened and wearied just by trying to make our way in this world even when we are trying to do the right thing. Sometimes we just can't win, and it is exhausting.

The Good News is that Jesus Christ came into our world not just to walk in the ways we walk, but to understand our pain and frustration in living in the ways of the world. Jesus knows the human dilemma of never being good enough to please the world, and never being clever enough to secure our own happiness. Jesus came into the world and sacrificed his life to show us through the power of Resurrection that there is another way to go. When we are willing to get over ourselves and to give up trying to arrange our lives around our own desires, when we are willing to release our need to be seen as wise and intelligent and in charge, and to accept the wisdom offered to infants, Jesus is there—offering the yoke made by his own hands that will bind us to *him*,

leading us to follow the voice of the Father who graciously wills a life of abundance created for us before the beginning of time.

The Good News is that Jesus Christ—the Way, the Truth, and the Life—is both/and—the one who comes with a sword *and* the one who gives us rest. He offers a sword to cut away our ties to those things in our lives that weigh us down and suck the life out of us. And he offers us rest in an easy yoke, walking beside us, helping to carry our load and helping to bear our burdens—of great responsibility, of pain, of failure, of grief and sorrow, of sin and shame, and of the just plain exhaustion of expectations placed upon us by others and by ourselves. The Good News is that when we accept and take on the yoke of Christ, it becomes one of liberation and relief, and joy. *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. Let us pray:*

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.