

“My Yoke is Easy,” Pentecost 5, July 9, 2017 FPC Marshfield

Texts: (Gen. 24:34-38, 42-49,58-67; Ps.45:10-17), Rom.7:15-25a; Matt. 11:16-19, 25-

Since we have just celebrated the 4th of July, we call to mind important symbols of our nation’s history. One of those is the Statue of Liberty greeting those who arrive in New York Harbor. On November 2, 1883, the poet Emma Lazarus wrote a sonnet entitled “The New Colossus.” It has long been posted in the exhibit at the base of the statue. The last part is the most well-known. It reminds us of our ideals, which we have not always followed:

“...Give me your tired, your poor,
your huddled masses yearning to be free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me.
Lift my lamp beside the golden door.

When we consider the last part of the reading for today from Matthew 11:28-30, “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.” It, too, reminds us of

the highest ideals for our faith and our country. According to Lazarus’ poem, our country is to reach out to the wretched of the earth, not only those who have good credentials. Jesus spent much of his ministry reaching out to the poorest in his society, such as those who were oppressed by the Roman taxation system, like peasant farmers and artisans. Jesus was also concerned about the widows, who had little way to support themselves in that society, and to the orphans, who were also left behind if they lost their parents, especially their fathers. The average woman married at about 13 and the average man at about 26. The lifespan often came to an end when people were in their thirties. Many children were orphaned before they were grown. Slaves were also common in the Roman Empire. Jesus cared for all these people, calling for distributive justice—enough for all, not too much for anyone. The Levitical law about the practice of Sabbath called the Jewish people to seek rest for their land, animals, and servants, as well as for themselves, on the seventh day of the week. It also called for welcoming the stranger and the alien.

This whole section of Matthew, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount, is meant to be instruction for

discipleship. If we are called to be Jesus' disciples we are expected to do difficult things, like forgiving those who have hurt us and loving our enemies. So how can this yoke be easy?

A yoke is a bar, often made of wood, fitted across the necks of two oxen so they will work as a team as they plow the fields or haul a wagon. So perhaps Jesus is offering to be the other party in carrying the yoke of discipleship. Jesus is pulling with us, not expecting us to do it all by ourselves. The stole worn by clergy is a symbol of a yoke. In the Presbyterian system of ordaining deacons and elders, they may also wear a stole, for like a yoke it is a call to service.

A yoke might also be a symbol of domination.

Throughout their history, the Israelites were oppressed by one empire after another. They became a people after escaping from slavery in Egypt. After a short period of independence under the judges and then David and Solomon, they split into two parts. The Northern Kingdom was defeated and carried off into exile by the Assyrian Empire. A few years later, the Southern Kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonian Empire and the leadership was also carried off into exile. The

Persian Empire restored them to their homeland, but it was defeated by the Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great. It split into several parts after Alexander's death, and Israel continued to be dominated by the Greeks, who tried to wipe out the practice of Judaism. Antiochus IV Epiphanes was eventually defeated by the Macabees in about 150 BCE. However, the Romans were rising. Their republic became an empire, which occupied the Jewish homeland during Jesus' time. The Jews were free to rule their own land for very little of their history. Jesus objected to the yoke of oppression laid upon his people by these empires, especially the Romans, but he sought justice and fairness through non-violence. If Jesus had been part of a violent revolutionary group, the Romans would have also crucified his followers, but, according to John Dominic Crossan, they did not go after the followers of non-violent resisters. That is why Jesus' followers, at least at first, escaped persecution.

Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden is light, especially compared to the yoke of oppression laid upon the Jewish people and other subject peoples by the Roman Empire. Our

lives, as individuals and as a community, will be easier if we allow Jesus to carry a part of the load for us.

I would like to turn now to the passage for today from Paul's letter to the Romans. For the last three weeks, our lessons have been based on Romans 6:3-4, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

In baptism, we become part of dying and rising with Christ, in this life, here and now, not just in the life to come. We die to the old life of sin and we live a new and transformed life as disciples of Christ. In the passage for today, Paul explains our inner conflict with sin that continues, even though we have been baptized. As much as we want to do the right thing, to do what God would have us to do, we find it very difficult. It is sin that drags us down and keeps us from doing what we believe God wills us to do. But there is hope! The baptismal experience of dying and rising with

Christ is a spiritual reality that is destined by God to be incarnated in our daily lives and relationships. God's grace through Jesus Christ will overcome the tug of sin and our weakness as human beings, and we will be able to do God's will. We live in a paradox; our will to do what God would have us to do, our will to seek justice and fairness for all, to be the disciples we are called to be, struggles with sin and human weakness, our tendency to greed and to retribution rather than to God's love and justice for all.

We often think of sin as the acts that we do as individuals that hurt others. Such sins are part of our humanity. It seems that we cannot avoid hurting others. I often say to couples being married that it is necessary to forgive one another if the marriage is to work, for it often our closest friends and family that we hurt the most. The love that we proclaim at the beginning has to be supported by a commitment to each other even when life offers difficulties. My friend the hymn writer Brian Wren wrote a hymn to love in 1978 at the time his first marriage was breaking up. It expresses how we struggle with love, trust, and betrayal in our paradoxical life.

When love is found and hope comes home,
Sing and be glad that two are one.
When love explodes and fills the sky,
Praise God and share our Maker's joy.

When love has flowered in trust and care,
Build both each day that love may dare
To reach beyond home's warmth and light
To serve and strive for truth and right.

When love is tried as loved-ones change,
Hold still to hope though all seems strange.
Till ease returns and love grows wise
Through listening ears and opened eyes.

When love is torn and trust betrayed,
Pray strength to loe till torments fade.
Till lovers keep no score of wring
But hear through pain love's Easter song.

Praise God for love, praise God for life,
In age or youth, in husband, wife.
Lift up your hearts. Let love be fed
Through death and life in broken bread.

Our struggle in our individual relationships is only one part of this paradox that Paul talks about. We also need to look at the sin and injustice that goes on in our corporate lives. My friend and mentor Howard Rice frequently said that

“we need to pay less attention to the sins of the bedroom and more to the sins of the board room.” Corporations seem to have become more interested in the bottom line for their stockholders than the concerns for all the stakeholders in a company's business. If a business is to contribute to the good of all, it needs to consider its employees, customers, the community at large, and its impact on the environment as well as its corporate profits. Politicians, too, are often so caught up in their next re-election campaign that they have trouble doing what they think is the right thing for the community. They are afraid of a primary challenge if they take a stand different from their own party position. They spend most of their time raising money for the next election rather than listening to the concerns of their constituents. We have already discussed the injustice that comes from the misuse of power of empires and nations.

Our human paradox between sin and God's will, between power and justice for all, between violent retribution and fairness for the least among us, makes our yokes difficult to carry. But Jesus is willing to take a lot of the load so that we can grow in discipleship and love for our neighbors.