

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 ¹⁶ “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another: ¹⁷ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸ “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; ¹⁹ 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 her deeds”... 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; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ “Come to me, all you who 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.”

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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“Weary and Carrying Heavy Burdens”

Rev. Amy Terhune

“Former Georgia Tech football coach, Pepper Rodgers, recalls an incident from his days as a high school baseball player. In one particular game, he stepped up to the plate to bat and the catcher on the other team began to taunt him: “Well, look who we have here, the great Pepper Rodgers. Know what they're saying about you?” Pepper asked, “What?”

“They're saying that you think you're about the best thing in this league, that you're a real hot dog.” And Pepper replied, “Is that so? Know what they're saying about you?” The catcher asked, “What?” To which Pepper responded, “Nothing.” Which I take to mean that when someone is bothering to criticize, you must have some life in you yet. [from Bill Bouknight, Collected Sermons, ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., illustrations on Matthew 11, www.Sermons.com.]

That much could certainly be said for Jesus. He healed many people...on the Sabbath. He pronounced sins forgiven...repeatedly. He included among his disciples a tax-collector, and among his closest followers, prostitutes and other sinners. He claimed to speak for God. There is no shortage of issues upon which one could have criticized Jesus, which helped his opponents in the end.

In today's lesson, he addresses the criticism leveled against him in front of a crowd. The beginning part is fairly simple. Whether the tune be mournful or joyful, there are some who have no intention of embracing the music. In other words, whether John comes as a hell-fire and brimstone fanatic, or Jesus comes as loving and grace-extending savior, there are some who have no intention of embracing new thought, changing practices, or reforming the system. Recently, I saw a post on Facebook about the perfect worship service. It listed things such as:

- More fast songs in the opening praise time, and also more slow songs.
- More of those lovely classic hymns and fewer of those boring old hymns.
- More repetition of songs so we can learn them, but less singing the same thing over and over.
- Songs should flow quickly from one to the other, with more quiet time in between them for reflection.

No wonder Jesus is exasperated. I get it. The problem is all the people who don't get it. I love how M. Eugene Boring puts this in his commentary on Matthew. He writes, “All those who should

recognize the definitive revelation of God taking place in their midst fail to get it. John the Baptist, who had baptized Jesus, knew his own unworthiness, and heard a heavenly voice didn't get it. Those who had their own games to play and found that neither John nor Jesus met the predetermined criteria of the own values did not get it. [The cities of] Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, in whose presence Jesus had lived out the might acts of the dawning Kingdom of God did not get it. The scholars and the wise, who could explain much but missed the revelation in their midst did not get it. [from M. Eugene Boring, "The Gospel of Matthew: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) pg. 275.]

So who did get it? Infants. The crowd to whom Jesus speaks.

If we pick up where the reading continued this morning, we find Jesus offering a prayer of thanksgiving to God for *hiding the truth* (which may seem a little troubling) from the wise and the intelligent and revealing them instead to infants, and this by God's gracious will, to boot. Please note: this is not condemnation of learning or growth. Quite the contrary – we're instructed to take his yoke upon our shoulders and learn from him. This instead represents a condemnation of all those who don't get it. And they don't get it because they're not open to it. It has nothing to do with intellect or ability. It has to do with spirit. It has to do with being open to the movement of God.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest," says Jesus. "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."

"So what," asks Bill Ritter, "does Jesus mean by the words "light and easy?" Are we talking "loose," as in lots of leeway, slack and wiggle room? Walk with Jesus four days out of seven? Live the Christian life nine months out of twelve....take summers off? Receive a 30-day discount rate on the commandments....keep any six out of ten?

"No, "easy" does not mean "soft." It means "tailored." The word "easy" in Greek is *chrestos*, which means "well-fitting." [2 ¶s adapted slightly from "The Yoke's On You" by William A. Ritter, www.Sermons.com.] The yoke Jesus fits us with is made just for us. And as yokes always are, the yoke is made for two, which means that when our head is to the wind and our shoulder to the plow, the one right beside us, yoked to us come what may, is none other than the creator of the yoke and the universe.

Now it may occur to you at this point that taking on a yoke—no matter how well fitted—doesn't sound so great. John Jewell, author of *Knowing God*, offers insight on this – insight particularly fitting on this Independence Day weekend. He writes:

"There is something quite important for us to understand as we celebrate Independence Day. There is a "flip flop" quality to understanding today's scripture. It goes counter to our usual way of thinking. America is the home of Davey Crockett who conquered the "wild frontier" and Wyatt Earp who tamed the "wild west." We honor and value independence, self-sufficiency, strength and the glory of a "self-made" man or woman. Surrender is what we did not do. With brains and brawn we became a super power in the world. "Yankee Ingenuity" is the brilliance that made us great. Resisting the yoke others would put on us is the strength that made us free.

"Now Jesus comes along to say that wisdom and intelligence do not cut the mustard when it comes to knowing God. Not only is the yoke not to be resisted, we are to voluntarily take this yoke upon ourselves and surrender to one who is greater than us!

"How counter-cultural can you get? We cannot fight, or think, or power ourselves into the kingdom of God and the peace of Christ. [3 ¶s from John Jewell, *Knowing God*, illustrations on Matthew 11, www.Sermons.com.] No, that comes only from surrendering ourselves to the Creator of the Universe.

Consider who Jesus is addressing her. It's not the disciples or the pharisees or the religious elite. It's the crowd. The riffraff, the rabble, the poor, the sick, the outcast, the sinner. In short, the burdened—those traditionally unwelcome to enter the temple and worship God as part of the children of Israel. 'Come to me,' says Jesus, 'all you who are sinking under the weights forced upon you and I will show you what real worship is. With gentleness and humility, I will bring you into the presence of God, and you souls shall feel the difference.' Which had to sound like good news to a crowd that hadn't heard good news in a long time.

If we're honest, most of us in this room probably don't find ourselves naturally inclined to identify with the crowd. Some 70 or 80 years ago, one of the great theologians of the 20th century was a guy named Paul Tillich. He's sometimes called the father of existential theology. His three volume Systematic Theology is one I still reference regularly, even though it takes me about a half hour to digest a page or two. But despite his academic genius, he had a pragmatism about him, a grounded faith, so to speak. And when asked once by a reporter to define a Christian, he gave an answer you may have heard. Tillich said, "A Christ is one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

Most of us don't want to think of ourselves as beggars, as riffraff or rabble or outcast. And I can accept that. The difficult is that most of us don't want to think of ourselves as sinner either. As persons with need. But every one of us carries burdens – burdens that weary the spirit more than the body. Burdens of guilt, of shame, of fear, of worry, of despair. My personal burden is cynicism. I've said so before. I make a choice every morning to live in hope regardless of the evidence. Some days are easier than others. This week, given news out of the Supreme Court, it's been pretty rough, if I'm going to be transparent. There are times when I don't like the thoughts that cross my mind or the words that cross my lips, when I don't embody the person I want to be.

In just a few minutes, Bryan's going to sing a song that I've wanted to do near the 4th of July for some time now. It's by pop artist Katy Perry, who is the daughter of Pentecostal ministers. Her first was called 'Teenage Dream', released when she was just a teenager herself. She wrote it to give hope to other teenagers out there. The words that Bryan is going to sing is from a song called 'Firework', and they go like this:

Do you ever feel like a plastic bag
Drifting through the wind, wanting to start again?
Do you ever feel paper-thin
Like a house of cards, one blow from caving in?
Do you ever feel already buried deep?
Six feet under, screams, but no one seems to hear a thing
Do you know that there's still a chance for you?
'Cause there's a spark in you
You don't have to feel like a waste of space
You're original, cannot be replaced
If you only knew what the future holds
After a hurricane comes a rainbow
So ignite the light and let it shine
Just own the night like the Fourth of July
Cause baby, you're a firework...

Which brings us back around to that yoke. I recall being a teenager, once, quite a while ago now. And I recall being dismayed with Mom and Dad who were enforcing some rule or another. I was generally a pretty cooperative kid. I usually followed the rules. With sufficient nagging, I did my

chores. But every now and then, I came up against a rule to which I saw absolutely no point. My parents were nearly always wholly unswayed by my attempts to use logic and reason to show why their rule was stupid. Inevitably, Dad would say “it’s my way or the highway,” and I distinctly recall thinking that maybe the highway wouldn’t be so bad. But I never actually ran off, because I had no means to survive on my own out there on the highway.

I was still a teenager when I first felt Christ tap my shoulder and heard him call my name to follow. And I can’t shake the feeling that what most appealed to me about Jesus was that he never once said “my way or the highway.” No, he did not, although he clearly has standards. He said, “take my yoke. Fall in step with me. Together we’ll light things up. Because my way – my way IS the high way.”