

The Yoke and Burden of Jesus

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July 9, 2023

I want to start by giving some context for today's gospel reading from Matthew 11, because it's helpful to know a little about John the Baptist, who Jesus refers to in these first verses. John is portrayed in Matthew as a Jewish prophet whose lifestyle and message were simple and austere. He was drawn to live in the desert, and we're told he wore camel-hair clothes and a leather belt, and lived on locusts and wild honey. His message was just as stark and to the point as his clothing and diet: "God's kingdom is here, and you all need to confess your sins, be baptized, and change your hearts and lives." He also announced that the Messiah was on his way and that it was going to get even more intense once he arrived—that the Messiah was really going to clean house. John had his own circle of disciples and many followers, and he baptized a lot of people in the Jordan River, including Jesus.

As an aside I have to admit that every time I think of John the Baptist, I can't help but remember sitting in Sunday school when I was about seven years old. The teacher was telling us about John the Baptist when into the classroom walked a man with what I later realized was a khaki-colored chenille bathmat draped over one shoulder and belted at the waist. My eyes widened—*John the Baptist was there!*—and it took me a few seconds to recognize church member Jim Forrester.

Anyway, for several reasons, King Herod didn't like John, and he had him put in prison. Meanwhile, Jesus had started preaching, healing people, and hanging out with everyone from tax collectors to poor widows. His ministry looked so different from John's that John actually started to wonder if Jesus really was the Messiah. He sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask him, "Are you really the one we've been waiting for, or should we be looking for someone else?" Jesus told them, "Go tell John what you're seeing and hearing: Those who were blind are able to see. People with skin diseases are being cleansed. The poor are learning that God loves them and is on their side." And he affirmed that John was indeed a great prophet and had an important role to play.

That leads us into our reading for today, Matthew 11:16–19 and 25–30, where Jesus is speaking to a crowd:

To what will I compare this generation? It is like a child sitting in the marketplaces calling out to others, "We played the flute for you and you didn't dance. We sang a funeral song and you didn't mourn." For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon." Yet the Human One [Jesus referring to himself] came eating and

drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunk, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” But wisdom is proved to be right by her works.

At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you’ve hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have shown them to babies. Indeed, Father, this brings you happiness. My Father has handed all things over to me. No one knows the Son except the Father. And nobody knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wants to reveal him.

“Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I’m gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.”

It makes us a little uncomfortable to think of Jesus as irritable and cranky, but he certainly sounds that way in the first verses of this passage—and his frustration is understandable. The people of this generation aren’t listening to John *or* Jesus because they’re not looking beyond the superficial details of their lives. They decide that because of his austere lifestyle, weird clothing and diet, John is some kind of freak and must have a demon.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is Jesus, who has this habit of eating and drinking with sinners—not to mention that story where he turns water into wine at the wedding celebration in Cana. Obviously he’s a party guy, right? This generation finds reason to dismiss both of them. In the words of Rev. Scott Hoezee, the people are saying, “We’ll know God’s servants when we see them, and these two ain’t it.”¹

As I said, Jesus’ frustration is understandable here. We all know what it’s like to be misunderstood, to have people make assumptions about us based on superficial things like our skin color, our age, our accent, our gender identity, our physical abilities. And we’re all guilty of making generalizations about whole groups of people based on only a little information about a few. That’s how stereotypes get formed. It’s hard when people don’t see us for who we really are.

But God consistently surprises us by using people we don’t expect to carry out God’s work. A couple of weeks ago, Bonnie talked about how the twelve disciples were ordinary men, ranging from a political activist to fishermen. God chooses a wrinkled old couple, Abraham and Sarah, to start a mighty nation even though they didn’t manage to produce children even when they were young and virile. God chooses Rahab, a prostitute, to help his spies and overtake Jericho. Then of course there’s Mary, a young, unsuspecting virgin, whom God chooses to be the human

¹ Scott Hoezee, *Center for Excellence in Preaching*, <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2020-06-29/matthew-1116-19-25-30-2/>.

mother of God's son. Those are only a few of the many examples we find in the Bible, and God still surprises us today.

In this scripture passage, neither John nor Jesus fits the people's expectations. These folks have certain ideas and images of what their prophets and teachers should look like and be like. And as a result, they're missing out. They're missing out on learning about the good news, that God wants to ease their suffering, that in God's realm, everyone is loved and welcomed and fed and forgiven, and so much more. Even though John and Jesus are right in front of them, people aren't seeing their gifts or hearing their message. They just don't get it, because the packaging doesn't fit what they're expecting or look the way they want it to.

What are our expectations, and how do we react when they're not met, or they're not met in the way we were looking for?

We have expectations and hopes about any number of things. Maybe we expect a movie to be really good because it's received so much hype, and then we're disappointed when it's not. Not a big deal, right? But sometimes the stakes are higher, and they have to do with people. Maybe we expect our spouse to show endless patience with us, and then we get upset when they don't. Maybe we expect our leaders to look like us, or have a certain amount of education, and when they don't, we dismiss them, tune them out.

But God was at work in both John and Jesus, just as God is at work in a variety of people today. And in this passage, Jesus stops to praise God for the people who are listening, who do look past the superficial and toward a deeper understanding. Again, they aren't the educated, more sophisticated people you'd think; they're the babies, the children, the ones still learning. It's another example of upside-down logic in an upside-down kingdom.

What are we missing when we don't take the time or attention to see or hear people for who they really are? What gifts in them might we overlook because they aren't what we *think* we want or expect?

And just as important, what do we miss when we don't see *ourselves* for who *we* really are, when we don't recognize, or we dismiss, our *own* gifts? My friends, downplaying our own gifts does not serve the world.

Pondering those questions, discerning answers, takes time. It takes time to get to know people, whether you've just met them or you've been with them thirty years. Heaven knows I still have a lot to learn about Cindy. But this leads us to the last part of today's verses from Matthew, this beautiful and comforting invitation that is one of the most loved passages in the Bible: "Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my

yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light."

We all have our unique burdens. Maybe you're worried about a loved one's health or your own, maybe your heart is grieving a loss, maybe you're trying to heal a relationship, maybe you're weighed down by loneliness, maybe you're just exhausted and *done* with responsibilities. But one burden we all share, because we're all human, is the burden of assumptions and expectations that cloud our ability to hear each other's voices and to see each other's gifts as well as our own.

Often when we think of this familiar passage, we think only of verse 28: "Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest," or perhaps you're more familiar with the King James Version: "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." But in the last two verses, Jesus invites us to put on his yoke.

Notice that he doesn't say, "Put your load down and leave it behind." We're always going to have burdens. A yoke allows two to share a load, whether that's two people or two oxen. A yoke is also used to guide and to discipline. But Jesus assures us that he's not tyrannical teacher; rather, he's gentle and humble. In fact the Greek word for yoke, *chrestos*, suggests kindness. The "rest" he refers to here comes from sharing the weight of our burden, redistributing the load.

I believe that we do that in community with each other, as a faith family and in the wider world, with God's help. Rev. Pamela L. Werntz writes, "It's about . . . supporting one another . . . and celebrating one another's gifts. . . It's about listening to and honoring other people's ideas, especially when they're not what you are expecting, or when they are very different from yours."²

My prayer is that we have the courage to lay down the burden of our preconceived molds and expectations that confine us, and trust that in walking side by side, in community, God is using each one of us to do God's work in the world. May it be so. Amen.

² Rev. Pamela L. Werntz, "Weeds or No Weeds," Emmanuel Church (Boston, MA), 2017-07-09, <https://www.emmanuelboston.org/sermons/2017-sermons/weeds-no-weeds/>