

July 9, 2017

Yoked with Christ

PRAYER

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN

SERMON

Having just celebrated Independence Day this past week, there's something extremely important for us to understand as we look at the words of Jesus in today's gospel. What Jesus says today is really when you look at it, counterintuitive, to our American mindset. Our American way of thinking. In America, we relish, we honor the self-made man, the self-made woman. We respect people who are able to stand on their own two feet, who are self-sufficient. We honor the values of strength and of force of will and self-sufficiency. These are staples of our cultural mindset. And yet today, we hear Jesus coming and saying that the way to the kingdom of God, the way to his peace is through surrender.

Now, how countercultural can you get. I mean, it is our fierce independence and our unwillingness to be yoked by anyone, to resist anyone who has placed a yoke on us and who has made our country the land of the free. And it is our yanking ingenuity, our independence, our drive that has made America a world power today. And yet Jesus is saying to us that self-sufficiency, strength, might these things just don't cut the mustard in our relationship with God. We cannot by our own efforts. We cannot by our own strength and persistence and drive earn seat at the banquet of grace that is God's kingdom. Man, that is so counterintuitive, so countercultural to our American mindset. Our American way of thinking. It's almost an oxymoron. Because Jesus is saying true liberty, true freedom comes in yoking our lives to him.

As you think about that, I'd like you to think about a story of the little boy who was helping his dad with some yardwork. And while they were out in the yard working the father asked the little guy to remove some stones. They were kind of big, and partially buried in the ground but the father let the little guy go about it. And a little while later, he looked over and watched the boy struggling digging around the rocks and trying with all his might to pull them up and get them out of there. But as much as the little boy struggled, as much effort as he put into it. He simply could not remove the rocks. Finally, the little boy was getting so frustrated that he turned to his father and said dad I can't do it. Father asked him, son did you use all your strength? The little guy was crestfallen and said yes sir. I used every ounce of strength I had. The father said no you didn't son. You didn't ask me to help you. So, the father walked over and helped his son and together they were able to remove the big rocks from the ground. Together they were able to remove the rocks.

There is an old legend about Jesus. It's not in the Bible, it's a legend that takes place in the years before his public ministry. And the legend claims that Jesus was one of the master yoke

makers in Nazareth. And people would come from miles around to have Jesus make yokes for their oxen. When they would bring the team to Jesus, he would spend a lot of time taking critical measurements of the animals. Their height, their width, the distance between them and then he would craft the yoke. A week later when the people came back, Jesus would put the yoke on the oxen very carefully and he would look very closely at the fit of the yoke. And he would make sure that it wasn't rubbing the animals in the wrong way. He would smooth out any rough spots. He worked it so that the yoke fit perfectly each team of oxen for which he crafted that yoke.

Today we hear Jesus inviting us to take upon ourselves his yoke. And that's the yoke he's talking about. He's talking about a yoke that has been crafted to fit our lives perfectly. The word in the Greek is *kristos* which describes this yoke. And that word means something that is kind or gentle. Something that provides what is needed. And what it implies is a yoke that fits each and every one of us perfectly. Jesus says, "take my yoke, it's easy. My burden is light." As we hear these words of Jesus, we dare not be misled by the word "easy." It literally means that perfect fit.

Commenting on this text, Martin Luther said that Jesus' burden is light because when we bear it and it gets too heavy. Jesus puts himself under it with us to help us carry it. And that's the good news that's being shared with us today. That we're invited to take this yoke upon ourselves but Jesus bares the yoke with us so that we can find true rest in him.

I think nothing captures the essence of what Jesus is saying today better than that familiar poem "Footsteps." You're probably familiar with it. It's a story of a man who's walking along the beach with the Lord. And as they walked along he sees scenes from his life flash before him. As they walked he notices that there are most of the times two sets of footprints. But every now and then he saw that there was only one set of footprints in the sand. And as he looked back at that, he noticed that those occurred at the times that he was having real struggles, real difficulties in his life. And he was dismayed as he came to that realization. He said Lord I thought you promised that when I followed you, you would be with me every step of the way. Why did you abandon me? Where were you in those difficult times? And Jesus answers, my son you know I love you and in those times, that were difficult for you where you see only one set of footprints. There's only one set of footprints there because those were the times that I was carrying you.

This morning Jesus invites you and me to take upon ourselves his yoke. He invites us to take upon ourselves this yoke that is made to fit our lives perfectly. A yoke that does not overburden us or rub us the wrong way or create sore spirits. But a yoke that fits us perfectly. As he invites us to take this yoke, he also assures us that he will be with us to give us his presence, his strength, his support. I noticed that the yokes that Jesus makes are always yokes for two. And the good news is that when we take upon ourselves his yoke, our yoke partner is Christ.

What burdens are you bearing today? What hurt, what pain, what discouragement, what disappointment? Jesus invites you to take his yoke and gives those hurts to him and he will put himself under those burdens with us. Helping us lift them up, helping us to endure, helping us to bear the load.

PRAYER

May that peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN