

Third Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
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Mercy, Mercy, and that's No Yoke

From an early age, I have been sensitive to what seemed to fair. Being the older sister of a younger brother, I remember complaining to my parents about their unequal and unfair treatment of us. It also happened sometimes with friends. When I was about age 7, probably a second grader. We lived in a suburban neighborhood in rural Johnson City, Tennessee. There were three sets of sisters close to my age in our subdivision, so we had a grand time playing together in the woods, imitating characters from TV shows like Gilligan's Island, Tarzan, and Batman. One day we actually had a real stage, with curtains, and a play to produce. I can't remember what the play was, but it involved a princess as the main character. One of our friends, Debra, was really dominant. She had alienated the rest of us. It looked like I would have the unusual opportunity to play the lead (which Debra normally would have.) But, the other girls softened, and forgave Debra. They chose her to have the lead role, AGAIN! I was so frustrated with their forgiveness and my tiny role that I decided to leave. They could do the play without me. I trudged home. Mom asked me what happened. When I explained, she thought of a way to mollify me. "How about I let you wear my a long, brunette wig for your costume?" I loved the idea of that. So, as kids will do, within a half hour of storming out of the production, I came back, with long locks flowing. I may not have the lead part, but I had the best costume.

"But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn."

The simile in this passage isn't clear to scholars. Some say it is referring to children, playing either a game of "funeral", (wailing and mourning) or game of "wedding" (circled around, and playing flutes). What is clearer is that Jesus was addressing his critics, noting their refusal to graciously accept the message of God's mercy for all who turn toward God. He noted that with John, they complained that he was too ascetic, avoiding feasting and drinking. And those same critics complained that Jesus was doing too much eating and drinking (especially with those tax collectors and other despised ones!) Talk about party-poopers!

Can we see ourselves in this mindset? The disapproval of the one whose work ethic seems lacking? The judgment of the one who didn't follow the rules. The holding back of approval for the one who really didn't pay their dues. Here's the thing about Jesus: his primary lesson, over and over, is that of God's constant mercy and forgiveness, for those who turn back to God, regardless of their rule-breaking, their faults and flaws. This gets really annoying, especially if you are already good at following the rules, and don't need to "repent" in the first place. Where's the advantage of rule-following if God just keeps forgiving the sinners?

When I preach sermons on the prodigal son, and the resentful older brother, I nearly always hear from someone, that it just isn't fair, that even though the prodigal repented, it just wasn't fair to the older brother.

Lest you think this is just an issue detached from real, everyday issues, think about this example? We recently saw a backlash and reversal that came when there was a forgiveness of

college student loan debt. Unfair! It wasn't fair to those who worked their way through and didn't take out a loan. Unfair to those who didn't go to college. You can disagree with me on this (or anything else, for that matter!) But, it is undeniably an example of an act of mercy for some, that rises the ire of others.

But this issue may hit many of us even more personally. Maybe with a sibling, or in a work situation, we've found ourselves resenting the grace, the second chance, extended to someone else.

Friends, when we tap into a situation like that, we are tapping into the Gospel message. The loving parent kills the fatted calf and throws a party when the lost sibling returns home. . . Jesus, even from the cross, forgives, "for they don't know what they are doing."

There's a lot packed into our reading today. The lectionary doesn't even include the verses between 20 and 25, which can be summarized as more detail on Jesus' harsh words to his hypocritical critics. What captures most attention for most of us, though, are the last few verses about the light burden in Jesus, and the easy yoke.

Have you ever seen an oxen -yoke? The yoke is a device that literally locks two necks together. Sort of like a three-legged race. You are not going anywhere without your yoke-mate. The work of walking together in sync, let alone plow a rocky field, is going to take a lot of effort. And that's no yoke. It makes sense that Jesus used this metaphor, as many of the original hearers of these words of Gospel were Galilean peasants, who labored long and hard to grow food in the rocky, Mediterranean soil. We are talking about grueling physical labor. And on top of that labor, they were forced to pay a heavy temple tax , or else be out of alignment in their religious practice. Being yoked was not an easy or light thing.

For those of us who don't plow with oxen, (which is probably all of us!) maybe we can relate better to rowing a boat with someone else. Or raising a child with a partner, or working with someone you didn't necessarily choose. We all have our own perceptions, values and experiences. If we are not in alignment with each other, the work can become very difficult, indeed. For St. Andrew, in this interim time, it's vitally important that despite our sometimes different views on things, that we keep yoked with Jesus in compassion, kindness and giving one another the benefit of the doubt.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, one of my friends was leading a confirmation class in a local church. He asked me to come along with the class as a leader as we did a sort of pilgrimage down part of the twenty-one-mile Halstead Street, carrying a genuine oxen-yoke. This historic road cuts through many different neighborhoods, many of which had been settled by immigrants from Greece, Sweden, Italy, Ireland, Poland. In our group of youths, there were a teenage couple. In 1988, they stood out, since she was African-American and he was white. During part of the walk, they held hands as they walked. This attracted unwanted attention in one neighborhood. Four brawny ,young, white men, who looked to be in their twenties, began to follow our group, cat-calling, name calling, and threatening.

This was long before I had my own children, but I felt my mamma-bear energy kick in. Realistically, I didn't know how I'd manage in a physical fight, but I felt it was my duty to put my body in the way to protect them, if the need arose. Without hesitation, I felt yoked to the youth group that I had bonded with over the day.

I was so outraged at the behavior of those young men. One of them was even wearing a Bruce Springsteen T-shirt (one of my heroes). How DARE he associate with the Boss! They followed us for blocks, but never did attack us. Once we arrived at our church destination, the hoodlums left us.

Those guys acted as though they were superior on the color of their white skin. We know the insanity of that belief. But, now, I realize that I must not then think of myself as superior to those young men. By our humanity, I am yoked to them.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

Wherever we see an injustice, we can breathe in our mama or papa bear spirit for change, but we can also lay down our burden of judgement.

To be told we can lay down our burdens sounds so sweet, until we realize that, in Jesus' eyes, many things we view as blessings are actually burdens. These would include, both in Jesus' time and ours, judging others, viewing ourselves as occupying a superior position to others and entitled to a more comfortable life with more material possessions. Our burdens would include all our efforts of excluding and avoiding the sinner, those on the bottom rung of the social ladder. Our burdens would include feeling entitled to gossip about others, feeling that we ourselves have done things the right way, where others have not.

Lay it down.

Jesus calls us to a life of forgiving and forgiveness. A life refreshed by the Spirit of grace.

What would the world look like, if we were conscious of being yoked to Jesus? Always walking the way of mercy? How would we be empowered to vibrant life? How would we grow in humility, discernment, courage, and compassion? What would the world look like, then?