

A-Proper 9, 2008
St. Luke's, Renton, WA
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Matthew 11.16-30

There are some portions of scripture that are like old and familiar friends. When I hear them, I feel a physical change in my body. I notice a change in my disposition. I relax, stop worrying, and I arrive at place within me where I know I will be OK, come what may. This last part of our lesson from Matthew is one of those portions of scripture.

“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.”

I don't even have to think about the words, they speak directly to my heart and to my soul. I guess I would say they are “chicken soup for the soul.”

There are certain people, too, with whom I feel completely at ease. Surely you do too. This is the person, these are the people, whom simply to see makes your blood pressure drop and your pulse slow. Perhaps that person is your cat. As opposed to the people who put you on edge, around whom you are ever vigilant, this is the person or people with whom you can be your most soft and open and playful self, people with whom you can share your fears and your faults and your failings and they won't think any less of you.

I have a few people like this in my life, but if I cast my mind's eye over the horizon of my lifetime, my great-grandmother stands out as the person with whom I could be completely at home as a child, and so, through all of life I have had a model for that feeling of being at one with another.

Jesus says, “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.” These comfortable words are not words of inaction. The image is of two animals, usually oxen, whose bodies have been linked together at the neck with a large wooden bar, comfortably shaped to their shoulders. And from the center of the bar, a chain or pole attaches to the heavy load they are to pull. The yoke disbursts the weight of the load between the two animals so that, if they both show up and walk, the load will be disbursed and their heavy slogging will turn into a walk in the park with a friend (I hope oxen are paired with their friends).

Jesus' invitation is to come along side us and share the burden, not to take it away, not to aid us in an escape act, but to walk along with us, shouldering some of the weight, sharing in the burden, making it light, being present to us in the times and places when we need such a friend.

Well, it appears there was a dispute, some contention in Matthew's day between the long-established Jews and these start-up followers of Jesus. It's an age-old dispute it happens in church all the time, it happens in most every context. The person or group that represents the established way desires to hold sway. When they are met with the fresh and new ideas and passion of those who are coming up later, there's bound to be some tension.

So Matthew tells the story of Jesus in a way that his own community can hear the message. Jesus says, in Matthew, that the way forward—the way of wisdom—has been hidden from the wise and the intelligent and has revealed it to ... babies. There is a knowing of wisdom, a way



of being together that eludes “the head people”—the wise and intelligent, the philosophers, the church teachers and preachers— ... there is a wisdom and a way of being together that eludes those in long-established positions and heads of state, but that is easily recognizable to *children*. [How’s that for conflict resolution!]

What I think he is getting at is that below all of the passionate arguing about who’s right and who’s wrong, what fits with tradition, what is new-fangled, ... below the din of debate lives the heart of the matter.

The language of a yoke is not unique to Matthew. Sirach or Wisdom states that students should put their necks in the yoke of the Torah so as to receive instruction. The student of wisdom was one who walked through life linked to the Torah, the word and wisdom pulling along next to them would make the way possible.

Matthew, it seems, borrows the language to say, not the Torah, per se, but Jesus (in whom the Torah is being lived out) ... hook up to Jesus, Matthew says and learn from him, he is gentle and humble.

Humble, derived from humus meaning earth. Human, derived from humus meaning earth. The story is that we were created out of the dust of the earth. To be humble, truly to be human, is to recognize in one another the commonness of our creation, that one is not above another in the eyes of our creator.

Hear a portion of our Old Testament story again. “Rejoice, shout aloud. Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” A triumphant and victorious king comes to town in humility? Just like you and me?

If this passage rings some bells in your heads it is because the same image is used of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. We sing “Hosanna” the king who comes riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

What happens next in Zechariah’s song? This humble, triumphant king will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off and he shall command peace to the nations and his dominion shall be from sea to shining sea. How beautiful!

There is a way of being human together that often eludes the intelligent and the leaders of the nations, but the knowledge of it, the experience of it, the sharing in it, runs along a pathway underneath all of the din of debate of who’s right and who’s wrong. Even children recognize the wisdom of this path. And many of us find it difficult to see or understand or get onto that path because, to do so, a person has to get down, go low, in order to recognize the common connection of humanity and the language that stills and fills the human heart. This is where Jesus comes along side us. This is where we walk together without fear of the other. This is where it doesn’t matter how we look who we are, all that distinguishes and separates us is stripped away and we walk together in the light of God.

The battling of war, the fight over who’s right, all of that lives at a level where we have lost touch with our humanity where pride has fooled us into believing that we are strong-enough on our own to pull the load. One day, and God help us all it will be soon, the load will become too much, the burden too great, and the song of Jesus will be heard in the land, “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.”

On that day rejoice greatly, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey and peace shall be from sea to shining sea.