

His Yoke is Easy
Proper 9, Year A • July 5, 2020
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
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“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” In the name of God. Amen.

Sometimes when Jesus speaks in parables, he tells a long story. The Good Samaritan. The Prodigal Son. And then sometimes a parable can be a word or a phrase. A sort of shimmering image, like the retrieved sheep or the found coin. But whether they are long or short, parables are mysterious. They are not like the fables of Aesop with pat takeaway morals. Instead they put us to work. They invite us in to wander around. They often invite us to interrogate ourselves and our established values. Jesus uses them more to challenge than to console.

You know, I’m not sure that the images we are given in Matthew this week would make anyone’s short list of parables. These complaining children in the market place. This easy yoke. But I’d like to wander around inside of them with you for a few minutes and see what’s there for us on this July 4 weekend that’s been not quite like any other we’ve lived through before.

First, the kids in the marketplace.

“To what will I compare this generation?” asks Jesus. “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.’” (Mt. 11:16) Now, so often when Jesus refers to children, these little ones, he’s drawn to their pure faith, their instinctive grasp of justice and compassion.

Not so with these particular children.

The image is one of anger and complaint, of children who have not had their way, who are disappointed that their expectations have not been met. “You’re not playing the games we want you to play!”

Just before this, Jesus has received a message from John the Baptist, who has been thrown into prison for his rebuke of Herod.

“John didn’t meet your expectations,” Jesus is telling the crowd. He didn’t play your game. You complained because he was too austere! Too serious! He wouldn’t dance for you!

Now I’m here and I make you uneasy because I enjoy my cocktails and am friendly with the fork! I want everyone – EVERYONE – at the table with me. You’re uneasy because I am not obviously pious! That I’m not in mourning.

Like those little people in the marketplace, Jesus is implying, you have a lot of growth ahead of you. You are perhaps too quick to evaluate and dismiss. Perhaps not mature or secure or relaxed enough to encounter a stranger on his or her own mysterious and sometimes startling terms.

This generation. This generation. He’s asking them to grow their frame of reference. To release preconception. What he is really asking them to do is surrender a sort of will to control.

You know, one of the umpteen Hollywood classics I’ve watched during quarantine has been *The Philadelphia Story* with Katherine Hepburn and Jimmy Stewart and Cary Grant. And there’s a quick delicious exchange between Stewart and Hepburn that gets right to the heart of what Jesus is saying in the parable of the children in the marketplace.

“You’ve made up your mind awfully young it seems to me” says Hepburn to Stewart. She has just accused him of being a dismissive snob.

“Well, thirty’s about time to make up your mind,” says Stewart.

“The time to make up your mind about *people*...” says Hepburn in perhaps one of the greatest movie lines ever, “The time to make up your mind about *people*...is NEVER!”

The wisdom in that exchange, like the wisdom in the parable of the children in the marketplace, is that part of holy living is honoring the mystery in one another.

We can’t scoop others up into our own agendas, even when those agendas seem noble or just.

“White people love to talk about racism,” said Byron Rushing to me once, some years ago. Byron served for many years as a state representative and is now president of the Roxbury Historical Society and one of our Diocesan reps to General Convention. I share his observation with you this morning with his permission.

“White people love to talk about racism as long as they get to control the conversation.”

I still take his point. Control can't be in the point in any conversation I have about race, especially with another whose race is not my own. That's because in holy encounter, we can't approach with our minds made up, like those children in the marketplace. God gives the growth. God gives the growth. God gives the growth so often in the form of an idea or a challenge from another who is not me. The idea is encounter and discovery. Encounter and discovery

Think about it: was the best Christmas morning simply that morning when you got everything on your list? Or was there some surprise that broke in and transformed the day into something beautiful and unforgettable? Could you have sculpted the face or set the timbre and tone of the voice of the person you love the most? When exactly was it when I began to confuse blessedness with the idea of having my own damned way?

How can you ever have imagined, says Jesus to the crowd this morning, that you could custom order your own savior? Or that that savior would align precisely with your own agendas and personal tastes, even if those are noble and good? We are built to find our deepest joy in connecting and not in controlling. And maybe that IS the easy yoke, the lighter burden.

You know, just before our lesson this morning, in the run up to Matthew's eleventh chapter, Jesus has been actively healing all over the region: the bleeding, the blind, the deaf, the diseased (Mt 8 & 9). Healing may be a sign of power – stunning displays of holy virtuosity. But the “deeds” revealed and that Jesus references this morning are also and perhaps more pointedly about the healed, through their healing, being returned into human community.

Sick people are so often reduced to a HE or a SHE and objectified by those who seem well. That's a point made by Michael Battle and Tony Campolo in their book, *The Church Enslaved*, which a number of us have taken up this spring. And we do the same to each other across racial difference, Reduce the other to a HE or a SHE instead of a YOU.¹

We need to look INTO each other and not AT each other, counsel Battle and Campolo. The yoke is easy, the burden light when we claim our true nature: that we are made for community. That we are individuals, and that we are built also for community.

You know, the Declaration of Independence highlights that very relationship in its opening and closing. There are these famous words in the opening sentences: “life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness.” Quoted less but of no less urgency are the final words of the Declaration: “We mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, our sacred honor.”ⁱⁱ

In other words, there is no independence without interdependence. We cannot be ourselves without each other.

Freedom is not autonomy but room to grow into the image of God. A three-part God we understand as a community. Freedom is not autonomy but the chance to accept others, always on their own sometimes mysterious terms, as they are called to accept us. Freedom is not private medicine but public health. Freedom is not private education but equal access to public learning. Freedom is not private dining but public feeding. Freedom is not private security but public safety.

The yoke of Jesus, the light burden of Jesus, is life in beloved community. And in the beginning God said that it was good. Good built us for good. And what is more joyful than claiming our first and truest nature?

This the yoke that is easy, the burden that is light. Will you pray with me now?

*God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by Thy might
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, forget Thee,
Shadowed beneath Thy hand, may we forever stand,
True to our God, true to our native land.ⁱⁱⁱ AMEN.*

ⁱ Battle, Michael and Campolo, Tony, *The Church Enslaved: a spirituality of racial reconciliation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2005) p. 138

ⁱⁱ <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

ⁱⁱⁱ Taken from “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” by James Weldon Johnson (Hymnal #599) and available at <https://www.metrolyrics.com/lift-every-voice-and-sing-lyrics-james-weldon-johnson.html>