

July 5, 2020

One of my favorite Seminary professors wrote a book, and the first sentence reads: “It’s not enough to say you believe in God, finally you must tell me about the God in whom you believe.” In other words, while we certainly believe in God; we might think about God in different ways. And as Lutherans, this is kind of our DNA, Luther understood God differently than the Catholic church of that time.

And it seems to me that this is what Jesus is saying in this passage. Jesus is calling out to everyone who is weary and carrying a heavy burden. Like a yoke, a harness that is constraining, enslaving, and ruthless. Sometimes religion can be that way.

Jesus says, “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” In other words, the God that Jesus points us to, is fundamentally different than the God represented by the religion of that time.

This morning I’d like to do some reflecting with the yoke that Jesus gives... And I should say right from the beginning, that Jesus doesn’t eliminate the yoke, he fundamentally changes it...

In our Lutheran tradition we make a distinction between law and gospel. In fact, in seminary many professors would say, if you learn only one thing in Seminary, you better learn the difference between law and gospel.

Quick exercise, I’d like you to do some imagining with me... Imagine hell- a place of burning torment. A place of pain, anguish, regret, despair, separation from God, and oh, did I mention burning, a lake of fire... Remember pictures of flames, pictures of people whose faces are twisted with agony, and for all eternity...

Now imagine that God is not loving or forgiving, but rather holding all people accountable... This is pretty much the church of Luther's time; this was why indulgences sold like hot cakes...

Now, imagine standing before God as the judge. He knows absolutely every sin you have ever committed, known and unknown... Every thought, every selfish act, every time you broke a commandment... And you wonder, how is God going to judge you? Were you good enough? Did you measure up? Did you sin too much?

Imagine standing there... Wondering all those things... And there's only two possibilities-- heaven or hell. Thumbs up or thumbs down... Imagine waiting for the verdict. Would you be a little anxious? Well, I certainly would be!

In a world without the good news of God's love and forgiveness, living under the law is a terrifying prospect! This form of religion is really spiritual abuse. God is seen as the task master, the judge, the jury, and the never-ending whip to do more, and sin less...

And, can you see how this yoke, this kind of religion makes people resentful, fearful, anxious and scarred to death? It's repressive...

Well, Jesus takes that metaphor of a yoke, that law-heavy religion, and changes it. 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.”

Through Jesus, through the gospel, we encounter that God is different than the God described by the religious people of his day. And that difference has everything to do with grace, and love, and mercy and forgiveness. The God that Jesus points us to, is a God who chooses us as his children, and loves us and cherishes us.

We are saved by grace through faith. We have confidence that God judges us with love and mercy and forgiveness.

Instead of living under a Yoke of law, of constraining and enslaving, we live under the Yoke of love and freedom. The yoke we live with now, is a yoke of loving God and loving our neighbor. Luther put it this way, “A Christian is the most free of all, and subject to none; and at the same time, a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.”

In other words, instead of being whipped into action, we are loved into action... Can you see the difference? We don't love our neighbor because we have to, we love our neighbor because we get to, and we want to.

Quick story... When I was at the Shepherd's Center there was a volunteer who helped people doing their taxes. And he took that responsibility very seriously. Every year he attended classes on the latest IRS changes, then he would set up appointments for people to meet with him.

And he did it for years and years. I can't remember how many tax-returns he had done when he finally called it quits, but it was astronomical. I was inspired by his due diligence and his perseverance, year after year. I remember talking with him one day, and I asked a stupid question, I asked, "Why do you keep doing all these tax returns?"

He looked me straight in the eye, chuckled and said, "Because I like too." Then we laughed, and he told me stories of people he had helped. People who became friends... You see, he didn't do it because he had to do it, he did it because he got to do it. It was meaningful for him, it was life-giving for him, it was his way of loving the neighbor.

And so, it is for all of us, in all the ways we love and help each other, we find life full of meaning, strong with purpose, and so it is, rest for our souls...

Amen...