

**When You Can’t Win,**

**Take the Yoke of Jesus**

**July 9, 2017**

**Matthew 11:16-19, 20-25**

Grace to you and peace, from God Our Father and from the one who invites us to take his yoke, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, amen.

You’ve probably heard the old joke that the Israelites wandered around in the wilderness for 40 years because even way back then men were too stubborn to stop and ask for directions… This may not totally explain the real reason why the Israelites wandered in the wilderness, but there’s some truth buried in the joke. The pressure of public opinion can be overpowering and we’ve all felt it. Instead of stopping and asking for directions and having to admit we’re uncertain or confused, we push on, and hope no one notices how lost we really are. Our fear of being ridiculed is greater than our fear of being wrong. As a society we have become convinced that as long as we have the approval of others, it doesn’t really matter how far off course we are.

Then there’s the story about an Old Man and his Son who were walking home from town one day with their donkey. As they made their way home, their neighbors began to laugh at them and asked themselves, ‘Why are both of them walking? One of them should be riding the donkey.” After much ridicule, the man placed his son on the donkey and they continued on their way. Soon their neighbors began to criticize them again saying, “Look at that! The boy is making that poor old man walk while he rides the donkey! Why doesn’t the boy get off that donkey and let the old man ride?” Hearing this, the boy dismounted, and the old man got on the donkey. Before long the neighbors again began to criticize them and wondered out loud, “Why is that man riding the donkey and making that helpless boy walk? What kind of man is he?” Hearing this, the father reached down and picked up his son and they both rode the donkey and continued their way home. Soon, the neighbors again complained and said to one another, “Look at that poor donkey, having to carry two people on its back! Why don’t they give that poor animal a break and get off of it before the animal gets hurt?” In desperation, the father and son did the only thing left for them to do. They picked up the donkey and carried it on their backs the rest of the way home. Of course, the neighbors laughed at the man and his son saying, “Look at those fools. They have a perfectly good donkey that could carry them, but they are carrying the donkey instead!” Seems that sometimes no matter what you do you can’t win the approval of others…

In today’s Gospel, the crowd that gathered around Jesus behaved just like these neighbors. Jesus tells the people they’re behaving like spoiled children in the market place. They complain because the people around them won’t dance when they play their flutes, nor will they cry when they sing sad songs. Which is why Jesus said to the crowd: “To what will I compare this generation?”

I find it interesting that know-it-alls are not a new development. These types of people were around even in the time of Jesus. And it’s not only just children that act this way. Adults do as well. In our text today, Jesus points out how the people had criticized John the Baptist because he fasted and would not drink alcohol. Now they criticized Him because (as he put it) “The Son of Man came eating and drinking” and the crowds grumbled; “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” As an aside, this passage contains the closest thing we have to a physical description of Jesus. Matthew quotes the opponents of Jesus calling Him a glutton and a drunk. Is it possible Jesus was slightly overweight? Maybe at least by ancient middle eastern standards… On the other hand, it could be simply like the story about the man and his donkey that no matter what Jesus did, he couldn’t win over those critics.

You just can’t win; Jesus seems to be saying when you look to society for acceptance and approval. He calls out his critics saying, y’all are behaving just like children because you’re always complaining I don’t quite match your expectations. Then Jesus did an amazing thing. He commended those with a child-like grasp of his message saying; “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.”

Just as people in Biblical times were worn out from all the social and religious rules and expectations, we too carry a heavy burden of trying to earn social approval. Throughout our lives we bear the burden of trying to live up to what other people tell us we have to be in order to be fit in. It starts with our parents, then our school peers, and in our adult years it’s the boss, or our co-workers and yes, even our neighbors and especially on social media today.

Sometimes this can take on almost demonic proportions. Look at the advertisements that assault us everyday. Eat this breakfast cereal, drive this make of pickup truck, use this deodorant, or wear this brand of clothing. There is no one here this morning who is free from the power of these ads or from the power of peer pressure to influence our actions. That’s why the words Jesus speaks today are so inviting. Listen to them again: “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.”

When Jesus promises us rest, he’s offering an alternative to all the “social rules” and “public opinions” as the basis for our lives. Jesus doesn’t care how many like you get on a post or how many friends you have on Facebook! Jesus is informing us that there is an alternative to all of these false truths and offers us another way. He invites us to put on his yoke and allow him to teach us about His way to salvation. Jesus wants us to take our focus off what others think and put our focus on Christ. Jesus wants us to exchange our yoke of sin and death for Christ’s yoke of love and eternal life.

Jesus describes his yoke as "easy." In the Greek, the word is ***chrestos***. Interestingly, ***crestos*** is only one letter different from Christos, the Greek word for Messiah or as we would say Christ… This word does not mean "not strenuous," but "being superior for a particular purpose or use." (Pencil vs pen for crossword puzzles…) Jesus is saying his yoke is better than any other yoke. ***Crestos*** can also mean "being useful and benevolent, being good." Jesus is saying his yoke is more beneficial than others. A third meaning of ***crestos*** is "being kind." Jesus is saying his yoke is kinder than any other yoke. Finally, ***crestos*** means "being pleasant or easy, with the implication of suitability." Jesus is saying his yoke fits us well -- it is suitable for our human condition and abilities. Perhaps like a couple "who are made for each other" -- being good and kind to each other is not a chore, but a natural and gracious response to the other.

This week I pondered why the yoke Jesus offers us is so easy. Normally we think of a yoke as the way we are locked in to some huge task that is going to take all our strength and effort. So, how is it that Jesus’ yoke takes away our burden? One thing I came up with is that Jesus has already pulled the load. The field has already been plowed. There is nothing left for us to do because Christ has already pulled the yoke to the cross of Calvary and to His death. Christ has already pulled the full load over the entire field. Here’s the part that really blows my mind. Christ pulled the yoke that was attached to the likes of me and you. He pulled us, sin and all, through death and hell, all the way to salvation. We can put down all the baggage we’re carrying because once yoked to Christ the work is done. Jesus said it from the cross when he said, “It is finished.”

The Words Jesus spoke today in our Gospel text are different from any that have ever been spoken before and different from what we hear from our bosses, teachers, co-workers and peers every day. Instead of giving us more rules and expectations, Jesus narrowed them down. Instead of scolding us for falling short, Jesus bent down to our level and raised us up. Instead of telling us how angry God was with us, Jesus spoke of incredible love and forgiveness. Instead of blaming us for failing in life, Jesus offers us an alternative. The Gospel message today delivers us from the yoke of impossible worldly expectations and gives us the “Good News” that God loves us just the way we are and when we’re yoked to Christ, we’re yoked not just to His death, but to His resurrection as well.

May each of us learn from Jesus to lay down the burdens of social and peer pressure, of trying to live up to the impossible demands of the world. May you find joy and blessing in the better, more useful, kinder, and much more suitable yoke of Jesus Christ, which is the proper and useful yoke that gives us the gift of salvation, amen.