

## *Weighing Yokes and Burdens*

Jeremiah 5: 1-9      Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

Last Sunday, we had mention of the yoke that the prophet Jeremiah wore after the Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem, and after Jeremiah got released from his house arrest.

Jeremiah and the prophet Hananiah had a public disagreement in prophecy. Hananiah was strident about his prophecy that called for overthrowing the Babylonian rule, for God would deliver the Babylonians into the hands of God's people. The punishment was over, and God would save God's people once again.

Jeremiah had been making the case all along that this punishment had been forewarned by prophets for a long, long time, and this was it – the punishment would not be brief. To demonstrate what God was doing, Jeremiah walked around with a yoke around his neck. Hananiah didn't appreciate Jeremiah's biting remarks, took the wooden yoke from Jeremiah's neck, and broke it. He restates his prophecy while Jeremiah walks away.

God is furious. God imposed the punishment and had no inclination to lessen its duration. He tells Jeremiah to denounce Hananiah and warn him of his imminent demise. A couple of months later, Hananiah's dead. God speaks of replacing the wooden yoke with an iron yoke.

The yoke symbolized God's punishment of God's people for their sinfulness and disregard for God's way, and for not heeding the many prophets who had warned them over many years.

We're familiar with yokes in the same way that our ancient ancestors were, as devices put around the necks of beasts of burden in order to control them. When we push past the practical agricultural tool, the yoke becomes a metaphor describing a relationship, its boundaries, its discipline, its nature. These can take a wide range from the positive to the negative in implication.

Husband and wife can be seen as yoked. We even symbolize the metaphorical yoke with wedding rings and bands. Here it's a partnership, and the symbols reflect the binding of one to the other. Depending on the marriage, that can be seen either positively or negatively. That determination would likely depend on the level of burden that accompanies the relationship for the partner.

Joining a church is sometimes referred to as accepting the yoke of fellowship. That turn of phrase acknowledges that we're bound to each other, and in that binding, we're bound to the work of the Lord within our community of faith. It tells how we work together, bear one another's burdens, share the load, and seek to pursue the same direction or goals in our ministry. Of course, when that doesn't happen, then the church is in trouble, the yoke is cast off, and people look for a new church relationship.

The lectionary brought us the passage in Matthew where Jesus talks about his yoke. Why we couldn't have had that one last week, when we were talking about Jeremiah's yoke, is something I cannot answer. But if we're going to do yokes again, then I thought we should have a companion passage that was yokey, too. Jeremiah once again provides the yoke, only at this point, he isn't wearing it. But you can see how the yoke remains an enduring theme in Jeremiah as this week's yoke is in chapter 5 and last week's was in chapter 28.

In this early chapter, we can discern that the deal-making with the Babylonians has run its course. Judah is almost tapped out from handing over payoffs to the Babylonians to keep them from invading. There is even a sense of religious self-righteousness that believes God will protect them and save them in the end. All of this is disconnected from what Jeremiah and many others in the past have been trying to tell them. It's the corruption of the society that has dishonored God and God's people with feckless leaders, corruption and injustice, and dishonest religiosity. The powers-that-be don't seem to get that God has a big complaint and God isn't doing anything to stop the outbreak of their punishment.

Reminiscent of Abraham's dickering with God over finding any righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah, Jeremiah is sent on a "Where's Waldo" mission to find a righteous individual in the streets of Jerusalem. And pay no attention to those weasels who say they're holier-than-thou; they're liars, too.

Jeremiah responds, remarking how incredibly stubborn the people have been, resistant to every form of correction and punishment. Jeremiah admits that at first, he thought it was just stupid poor people who don't any better. Then he went to the leaders, but they were no better. Resignedly, Jeremiah says: *they all alike had broken off the yoke, and torn off the bonds.*

There is the yoke. Last week, the yoke was God's yoke of correction and punishment on God's people. That was after the Babylonian conquest. Here the yoke refers to the faithful commitment of God's people to their God. *All alike* admits that there was no difference between those who held themselves in religious esteem and righteousness, and the lowliest wastrel of society. Together, they had *broken off the yoke, and torn off the bonds.* As if they had felt imprisoned by God's expectations of justice, peace, mercy, and compassion, they found their liberation in breaking free and casting aside the historic covenant partnership that had defined God and God's people. They evidenced no desire to be part of this relationship any longer.

That brings us to God's response to this declaration of infidelity from Jeremiah. In a shocked and despairing tone, God says:

*Why should I forgive you? Your children have forsaken me, and have sworn by gods who are no gods. I supplied all their needs, yet they committed adultery and thronged to the houses of prostitutes. They are well-fed lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor's wife.*

That's some great writing. Jeremiah or Baruch or whoever wrote it really outdid themselves here.

Now that does not mean that everyone is fornicating in the streets. That would be stupidly literal. The unfaithfulness of God's people who chase the "skirts" of other gods who are more to their liking is routinely portrayed as marital infidelity (see Hosea) or in adultery and prostitution. That's what's happening here as God depicts the partner people of his loving devotion and his faithful covenant as well-fed (by God), lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor's wife.

Now we can see that the yoke that God's people had broken off and the bonds of fidelity that they had torn off ended any discussion about whether or not correction and punishment of the severest kind was warranted. Returning to last week's passage from Jeremiah 28, we see how the yoke of covenant is replaced with the yoke of correction.

Let's push on to Matthew. Jesus had been instructing his disciples on their first mission trip. In chapter 11, Jesus spends most of the time teaching in response to questions from the followers of John the Baptist. They came to Jesus asking if he was the one who had been prophesied of not. Jesus responds by declaring, *the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor* (Mt. 11:5). (That's close to what Jesus instructed the disciples: heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the unclean, and resist evil [Mt. 10:8a])

As John's people are leaving, Jesus addresses the crowds, explaining to them the greatness of John the Baptist. In our passage, he shifts gears when he asks: *To what can I compare this generation?*

Jesus goes on to liken the religious leaders of his day to children in the marketplace, urging others to join them, but the other children refuse. The happy flute of celebration draws no dancers. The sad dirge likewise brought no mourners. In the same way, John and his call for repentance and discipline was rejected – the sad dirge. But so was Jesus' boundary-breaking call for love and compassion – the good news celebration dance. Both men of God were cast as unworthy and unacceptable. The religious authorities rejected the messengers of God who brought God's prophecy – repentance from John; good news from Jesus. But this could be expected.

Omitted from the reading is a denunciation of certain cities that rejected Jesus and his teaching.

Then Jesus speaks directly to God, commending God's wisdom in revealing the truths, insights, and understandings of the kingdom to "children" rather than "the wise and learned." "The wise and learned" would have rejected this word of the Lord, but "children," little ones unaffected by positions of power and prestige, were a ready audience.

After describing the sharing and trust God has given to Jesus, Jesus addresses the anxious people saying: *Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.* Jesus offers his way of life as an alternative to the way of life that's commonly experienced.

*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.* Jesus' yoke is unlike other yokes. The contrasting yoke isn't clear, but we might assume that not-easy yoke refers to the yoke of religious authorities, the ones who are often criticized and castigated in Jesus' ministry.

The institutional religious leader are seen making it difficult to stand before God, condemning people as unworthy and unrighteous, and even excluding people from God's presence in sacred spaces. They have made religious ritual and lawful obedience in practice as the things that matter most to God. They've made their rules and interpretations self-serving, but problematic for little people.

However, Jesus' claim that his yoke is easy and his burden is light needs some salesmanship. You'll recall the Sermon on the Mount. Nothing too easy and light there. Or his missionary instructions to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the unclean, and resist evil – nothing easy and light there either.

Jesus offers a path, a promise, a yoke oriented to the values that matter to God and Kingdom. Based on love, grace, compassion, peace, and justice, it is a very different yoke. Bearing this is a light burden compared to institutional expectations.

These also have a meaningful purpose in building the Kingdom, in fulfilling God's will, purpose, and promise for creation. They do not simply serve to maintain religiosity and meet institutional requirements. Jesus re-directs God's people to God's way.

The yoke formed out of love, grace, compassion, peace, and justice represents lofty expectations and idealistic values. These great things are made substantial not by the performance of some particular duty or ritual or observance. Rather, such Kingdom values have broad application, get defined in individual covenant, and seek a high level of faith and commitment.

Now Jesus will not change their lot in life. He will not transform them from paupers into princes, from commoners into elites. On this path with Jesus, God's people will find truth, goodness, and meaning. Those qualities alone are transformative. Unlike the yoke and the burden thrust continually on the common folk, wearing them down and stooping their shoulders, Jesus brings a notion of liberation from religious society's oppressive ways. Jesus invites them to the promise of new life provided by a loving, forgiving and gracious God. Indeed, Jesus is the incarnation of this divine path. In him, the faithful discover hope and empowerment, even amid oppression and injustice. His yoke is one worth bearing. It leads to new life for all.