

# Yoke

## **Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 9, 2023**

*Readings:* Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45: 11-18; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

*Sermon text:* Jesus said, “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 invites all of us who are weary and burdened to come to him and rest and take his yoke upon our head—and learn from him—what image comes to mind?

Well I thought a yoke as something fit around the head and neck of an animal, the stiff end of a harness connecting the animal to the plow, and perhaps also a sort of guiding system, like a horse’s bridle. But when I looked up the definition I found it is also connected with the idea of pairing, of joining two animals. Thus, a yoke of oxen. It is hard work pulling a plow through heavy soil; it helps to have a pair of pullers. So for Jesus to say that his yoke is easy and the burden light—well, perhaps he means that he is not expecting too much hard lifting from us, or perhaps he is saying that he—our yoke partner—is going to do the heavy lifting.

Lots of yoked pairs come to mind: body and mind, for one. And the mind itself can be pictured as a yoked set. Plato pictured appetite and passion harnessed together driving a chariot (the body) guided by reason—though of course which member of that tripartite group is truly driving may be questioned. Paul’s famous passage from Romans on the conflict between his reason and the appetites and passions of his “members” speaks to this point.

Body and mind together comprise a unified human soul, which then is filled with—yoked—to the divine by the Holy Spirit. Now “spirit” in Greek (*pneuma*) and Hebrew (*ruach*) can also mean breath and wind. We are connected by breath and wind to nature as well as to the holy. More like spokes on a wheel connected to the center here.

But a yoke partner with Jesus brings us closer to the center. The Son also yokes us to the Father, the source of all being, as well as the life-giving Spirit. You can see that Jesus being both fully human and fully divine is a connector on both sides, to the eternal divine and to the ever-changing material world.

Marriage is a kind of yoking too. Here two so closely join that the Bible calls marriage a “one flesh” union (Genesis 2:24). In our reading from Genesis 24, the story of the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca, we see a glimpse of an ancient nomadic cultural way of acquiring a partner. Certainly rather different than what we do nowadays—Abraham sends a servant to find a bride for his son Isaac and she confirms she is the one by giving water to his camels. But perhaps there are similarities; the servant seals the deal by putting a (nose) ring on it (Beyonce). Isaac is forty years old at the time and is comforted by marriage after the death of his mother. So parent issues are also different yet the same across time. But we’ll talk about his story and that of Rebecca and their feuding twin sons another time.

Church—like all sorts of community—is a kind of yoking together as well. Not always an easy or conflict free joining. Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:14 writes, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?”

Paul here makes a harsh division between belief and unbelief, the righteous and the wicked whereas I find my experience to lean more to what Luther wrote: that we (all of us) are simultaneously sinners and saints. Further, such a bright line between belief and unbelief is not reflective of our rather more complex and nuanced spiritual landscape.

Consider yoga. Looking up the definition of yoke, I found it interesting that it comes from the same Indo-European root as *yoga*—a word for union, joining, for yoga to the divine, for a yoke, a pair of oxen.

Now yoga is a major health and wellness sector of our economy, but also a form of spirituality, if not precisely a religion. It certainly takes the place for many of more traditional religions. For instance, the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Healing

in Great Barrington occupies the former site of Roman Catholic seminary (as does the Culinary Institute down the road in Hyde Park— perhaps food is another quasi-religion these days). Mary and I have been to Kripalu— one of our members here teaches there on occasion—a beautiful place. It seems to encompass all sorts of metaphysical adventures. As they write on Kripalu's summer newsletter, "Healing arts services are much more than massage and bodywork. Access your inner wisdom with metaphysical offerings designed to help you decipher the symbolic messages the universe is sending you."

You can sign up for an Akashic Record reading—past lives—or other psychic readings, something called integrative divination which combines as it says "divinatory tools from a variety of traditions including I Ching,, Chi Men Dun Jia, and 60 pillars as well as Western systems of Tarot, oracle cards and dowsing to provide insight and guidance." Other offerings include soul path astrology, sound therapy, spiritual Chinese astrology and Tarot readings. In other words, a loosely bundled set of beliefs and practices you can't quite call a coherent religion but which generally lives comfortably under the big tent of a Kripalu yoga center or an Omega Institute (our neighbor in Clinton corners).

Now as a young man I explored a few of these systems, including rather deep dives into Tarot and I Ching. I have read some of the Vedas and studied classics texts of Buddhism, Islam and account of native American indigenous religious beliefs and practices. I am far from seeing Christianity as the only carrier of wisdom and the Bible and Christian prayer as the only ways to "decipher the symbolic messages the universe is sending you." Of course we call the idea of a sentient and caring all encompassing creator and creation God and the world—but you see the connection. Early in the Christian teaching tradition, Justin martyr wrote of Greek philosophy that it is useful for teaching wisdom and passing knowledge—all truth is part of the Logos of God, the Word or Reason of God, who is also the Son of God who became incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Our rabbi and guru and mediator of the divine human connection.

Eastern practices of mediation and mindfulness, the bodywork of yoga and tai chi are wonderful contributions to human health and wellness. Insofar as the metaphysical and esoteric practices have value they are powerful ways to

unlock our imagination and vision and lower the bar of our sceptic minds to spiritual experiences that are authentic.

But I feel a duty as a teacher and guide—a pastor—to offer a few cautionary observations about this sort of new age salad bar spirituality.

First, a self-orienting self-created religion is not the biblical one. The God we know from scripture challenges and unsettles us: God commands Moses, take off your shoes; this is holy ground. The prophets, challenge us to love justice and do mercy. Jesus' first words, echoing those of John the Baptist, are repent and prepare for the coming of God's kingdom.

Unmoored from a robust sense of God, challenged to find meaning without reliable authority, it has become hard for many to find a purpose separate from the individualistic project of self-actualization. It becomes hard to find God outside of the sense of the divine in our own self (which Christianity acknowledges as the Holy Spirit). It becomes tempting to see the self writ large in the energy of the universe sending messages of self care and self glorification. *The Secret* is one more version of the power of positive (magic) thinking.

This self affirming intuitionism arises as a response to the weakening of trust and sense of belonging to institutions such as churches, which are perceived as corrupt, stifling, boring and irrelevant. Not to mention, untrue (as the latest wave of skeptics claim). But this state of affairs is unbalanced, unsustainable. Just as mystic intuitionism balances an excessively rigid institutional hierarchy, so Intuitionism cut off from institutions of coherence and stability lacks guide rails to constrain ego and delusion, as we see in the scandals of charismatic cults. The great tradition has always been mediated through institutions—which need to be critiqued when corrupt—as we all are—but absolutely necessary in my opinion for a balanced and resilient spiritual community to thrive and get handed on to our children (*traditio*: to hand on or over). Thus here at Grace we seek a *reenchantment* of church, so that we can have vital intergenerational and cross demographic communities of shared belief and practice. Hence our motto: Deep roots and open doors.

Church is not just about providing community—but truth, common vision as the ground of community. Messages from scripture and especially the New Testament can be relied on—that God is love, that God desires mercy not sacrifice, humility not overweening pride. Messages like that.

And messages of truth—along with rituals and buildings that provide beauty and joy— provide a sense of fullness and abundance to life—as well as the sobering teaching that we are all fallen, flawed sinners in need of repentance and conversion of life. And the call to prepare for the coming kingdom inspires believers to the work of making the world a better and more just place.

Jesus makes it clear—his teaching is not hard to comprehend—even the simple can grasp it—not esoteric or requiring long study, though endlessly deep and surprising when studied. It is based of course on the revelation that God is love. The force that created and fires the green fuse of the universe is love. We can indeed tap into it. The divine—it is within us—that is the teaching of the Holy Spirit. It is also outside of us—the creator of the universe beyond all understanding—and also right beside us, our brother, our friend, our yoke partner, Jesus Christ the Son of God. Let's hold on to him—the Way the Truth and the Life—and let go of searching in strange religions for unknown gods. He is right here—waiting and ready to be yoked with you.

In Christ's Name, Amen.

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