

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

The Easy Yoke^{*}

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There's a little-known – and rather charming – Anglo-Catholic tradition called the vesting prayers. A priest who practices this discipline says a special prayer while putting on each article of liturgical clothing before celebrating mass.

There's a prayer for putting on the alb, the white garment that is worn over one's regular clothes. There's another prayer for putting on the cincture, the rope belt that is tied around the alb. And there's still another prayer for putting on the stole, the long band of fabric that is worn around the neck.

If you'd like to learn more about the tradition of vesting prayers, I invite you to stop by the sacristy of the Holy Family chapel sometime in the very back of the church. There's a small plaque on the north wall of the sacristy, right next to the crucifix, that contains all seven vesting prayers in the order that they are said, from the washing of one's hands, to the putting on of the chasuble, the poncho-like vestment that is worn by the celebrant at each mass.

The final vesting prayer – the prayer for putting on the chasuble – is actually taken from today's gospel passage from Matthew about the yoke of Christ. The prayer reads: "O LORD, who hast said, My yoke is easy, and My burden is light, grant that I may so bear it, as to attain Thy grace." According to this prayer, the chasuble is a symbol of the yoke of Christ as well as the burden that one carries as a result of one's vocation or calling.

A yoke, for those of you who might not be experts in biblical agricultural practices, is a large bar of wood with two half-circles carved at the bottom. The yoke joins two animals (usually oxen) by the neck so that they can work more efficiently to pull a plow. Because of this connection with labor, the yoke is often used as a symbol in the Bible to represent slavery, subjugation, or the imposition of a foreign power upon a nation.

But Jesus has a different take on the yoke. He says in today's gospel that "my yoke is easy, and my burden light." What does he mean by that?

Recently, I came across a wonderful children's picture book called *Joshua's Yoke*. This book is actually one of the best explanations of today's gospel passage that I've ever

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seen. The book is about a large ox named Joshua and a little ox who is learning to carry his own yoke. The little ox struggles under the weight of his yoke, and Joshua offers several times to help. Each time, the little ox says no – he can carry the yoke by himself. But the yoke is so heavy that the little ox’s plowing always ends up being a mess.

One day, the little ox is talking to his friends, and he learns that they all receive help from Joshua. There is no shame in asking for his help. So the next time that Joshua offers to help the little ox, the little ox says yes. It turns out that Joshua has a special yoke. It is far larger and heavier on one side – Joshua’s side – so that Joshua is bearing almost all of the weight. The other side of the yoke is much smaller and, as such, it is easy to carry, and its burden is light. Joshua and the little ox work together and plow the fields beautifully.

Joshua’s Yoke is, of course, a parable about our own relationships with Jesus. We are the little ox. We struggle from the heavy burdens that we pull throughout our lives. Joshua is Jesus, and he repeatedly offers to help us. But we often resist letting him in because we believe that we can do it ourselves. It is only when we accept Jesus’ help, however, that we discover that our half of the yoke is actually easy and light and that Jesus is doing most of the work. If we plow God’s fields together with Jesus, we are able to accomplish what we could never do alone.

What burdens do you pull throughout your life? We all have our heavy burdens, and these burdens are often magnified by the nonstop hustle-and-bustle of the City That Never Sleeps. There is the burden of stress. There is the burden of fear. There is the burden of loneliness. Or addiction. Or feeling inadequate. The list goes on and on. But there is one burden that we might not recognize, which is often at the root of these other burdens. It is the burden of self-sufficiency.

“It’s OK, I don’t need help – I can do it by myself.” “If only I worked harder, I would be able to succeed.” “If only I did a better job, I would be able to receive the recognition and love that I crave from my family, coworkers, or community.” Does any of this sound familiar? Like the little ox in *Joshua’s Yoke*, we often think that we are self-sufficient and that we can do God’s work all by ourselves. In other words, *we* are the key to our own salvation. Salvation is merely a question of working harder or better.

What we don’t recognize, however, is that we simply cannot plow the fields by ourselves. In the end, our gifts, our talents, and our hard work cannot save us. Only letting Jesus in can. Salvation is about accepting God’s freely-given gift of grace through Jesus’ once-and-for-all sacrifice of the cross. We are yoked with Jesus so that he can help us with our burdens. And only when we accept this truth are our burdens truly lifted.

As Jesus says in today’s gospel, the truth is often hidden from the “wise and the intelligent” and revealed to “infants” instead. When it comes to the gospel, it is often the learned adults who act like stubborn children: they refuse to dance even though the flute is playing; they refuse to mourn even though others are wailing.

Indeed, the educated religious elite were the ones who criticized John the Baptist for not eating or drinking enough and, on the other hand, who criticized Jesus for being a glutton and a drunkard. The truth was hidden from these “wise and intelligent” people. How appropriate, therefore, that we learn about today’s gospel through a children’s picture book!

When we let Jesus in, our burdens are lifted. And when our burdens are lifted, we receive, in turn, the strength and freedom to help others with their burdens. This is the key reason for why the church community exists: to proclaim the good news of the gospel, and to lighten the burdens of our neighbors, just as Jesus has lightened ours.

You, my sisters and brothers and siblings in Christ, are members of the priesthood of all believers. As such, you too are wearing a chasuble that symbolizes Jesus’ yoke, even if you might not be able to see it. Remember the words of the traditional vesting prayers as you wear it: “O LORD, who hast said, My yoke is easy, and My burden is light, grant that I may so bear it, as to attain Thy grace.”

And be comforted and strengthened by Jesus’ words in today’s gospel: “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.”