

A Sermon for the 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost                      July 5, 2020  
Romans 7:15-25a      Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

“Come to me, all you who are weary...for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

These beautiful words are familiar to many of us. Jesus invites us into a relationship that sounds so perfect, so effortless, so easy. It’s a relationship many of us are longing for in these imperfect and troubled times. Yet in our reading from Romans today, Paul honestly admits that being in relationship with God isn’t all that easy. Paul’s words may also sound familiar to many of us, “I can will what I want but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” My Lutheran sister refers to this as the “doo doo” passage!

Like Paul, I also struggle. Every night around 9 o’clock my flesh says, “Go get some ice cream out of the freezer,” and my mind says, “Absolutely not! You may not have that; it’s not good for you!” I can empathize with Paul, for I do not understand my own actions either! More often than I care to admit, the law of sin that dwells in my members wins the ice cream debate.

Now there are worse sins than eating a bowl of ice cream, but the point is that like Paul we all struggle with controlling our thoughts and actions – it’s part of our fleshly human nature. And here’s the thing, if we do not understand our own actions, how in the world can we understand the actions of anyone else? Sin dwells within all of us; it makes our relationships complicated and difficult.

We’ve all had good intentions that we never got around to fulfilling. We forget to pay a bill, we can’t seem to get around to writing that note of encouragement, or we put off calling to check on our distant family members. On a higher level, we complain about things that need changing, forgetting that many hands make light work and that we need to be the change we want to see. Living in a pandemic makes everything harder, doesn’t it?

And then, we all have had experience with doing the very thing we hate – that thing we know better than to do. We get angry in traffic, we make a less than Christlike comment on Facebook, or we just outright refuse to listen to another perspective. We find it all too easy to become judgmental of others. Because we are only human, we all too often fall into immediate self-gratification and self-importance without pausing to consider how it might affect those around us. And when we are at our worst, we do and say things that are harmful to others.

There is always a tension between what we want in the moment and what we know is better for us. As Paul reminded the Romans, this is why God gave us the law. We tend to view law in a negative way, not realizing that its purpose is to help us know what is good and helpful. More than that, because it is impossible for us to keep the law all the time, as witnessed by Paul’s struggles and our own, the law shows us that we are in desperate need of grace!

And grace is exactly what we hear in the Gospel today. Jesus invites us to put down our burdens, and to stop struggling with our inmost self, so that we might receive the rest and the grace he longs to give us. We are carrying a lot of burdens right now. We are afraid of many things. Some of us have lost jobs, taken pay cuts we cannot afford, have family members we cannot visit due to restrictions, and know friends and loved ones who are living with or have died from COVID-19. Many of us are juggling family and work demands and don’t know what we will do if the schools cannot reopen in September.

These struggles are real. They bring stress to our relationships; they break into our well-planned lives bringing both loss and grief. All of these burdens are things that sometimes separate us from God. Perhaps we can take our cue from the Apostle Paul. “Who will rescue me?” he asks, and then gives us the answer, “Thanks be to God, Jesus Christ!”

Jesus calls all who are weary and carrying burdens, no matter what the burden, to come to him. But how exactly does he rescue us? By yoking us. At first, this does not sound like a good thing. We are exhausted and weary – why would we want to take on a yoke? But this yoke is not one that Jesus forces on us but one he invites us to wear with him!

When oxen are yoked, they share the burden of the load so that one of them does not work too hard. The older, trained ox teaches the younger inexperienced one the way to pull the load and to understand the commands. In being yoked with Jesus we are working with him beside us, being helped to do what is before us, being taught how to live in the tension of life’s choices. As Eugene Peterson translates it in “The Message”, “Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

So how do we keep company with Jesus? Just as being yoked provides oxen a balance to the load, being yoked with Jesus brings balance to our lives. Spending time with Jesus helps us release our struggles, loss, and grief into God’s safekeeping. Letting go of our burdens even for a few minutes each day, or for the evening so that we can rest, will bring us forgiveness, healing, and strength to get through each day, each challenge, each hard thing in life.

We can keep company with Jesus by being intentional about our choices. We can turn off the news, we can put down our phones, we can set a time limit on social media. Instead, we can use that time to practice some spiritual disciplines. We might choose to be more intentional about reading scripture daily, joining a Bible study, or simply sitting still in God’s presence for a few minutes each day. We could volunteer in ways that benefit others, such as taking a meal to someone or running errands for our shut ins. Perhaps we are in need of some self-care and could commit to a walk each day, to get more rest, or to stop buying ice cream!

Keeping company with Jesus means being yoked to the One who prays, teaches, heals, and feeds the hungry; to the One who befriends the tax collectors and sinners, and gives rest to the weary. Life is hard and we cannot do this on our own.

Keeping company with Jesus is not without its own challenges and risks, but it will free us to live life, not under the burden of the law but in the fullness and joy of God’s grace. When we take the yoke of Christ upon us, we have forgiveness when we cannot do the good we want to do, we have rest when we cannot bear the burden, and we will learn to live freely and lightly. Amen.