

Sermon for July 5, 2020

Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30

Rebekah Turnbaugh shared with me a recent episode of the podcast *The Daily* from the *New York Times* titled “A Weekend of Pain and Protest.” The focus was on the protests immediately following the death of George Floyd at the hands of police. The journalist narrating the first segment described a video she had seen of a small group of protesters in Charlotte, NC. Two black men -- one 45 years old, the other 31 -- are arguing passionately about the most effective way to protest so as to have their voices heard. The older man believes that destruction and violence against property is the only way to make white people understand the pain black people experience every time a black person is killed by authorities. The 31-year-old believes violent protests are counter-productive because they only give those with power an excuse to dismiss the voices of black Americans and the true message behind the protests. The only thing they both agree on is how tired they are and how burdened by the knowledge that nothing seems to change. The men are shouting at one another, wanting to be heard. Their pain is evident in the cracking of their voices, particularly as they engage a young black teen, who is only 16. The younger of the two older men, gets in the boy’s face to tell him that violence will only lead to his own harm and that it’s not worth it. That in ten years

he will only end up in the same place they are today. That is unless the teen and his generation of black youth come up with a new way to have their voices heard.

“Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”

The question for us is, “what does Jesus ask of us if the burdens are not immediately our own but those of our fellow human beings?” And “what do we do when we do not know what to do that will make a difference?” And that this in itself feels like a burden to us -- to care deeply about the plight and burden of our neighbor but not to know how to act. Sometimes it feels like no matter what we do we can't win. I know there are people out there who feel like no matter how good their intentions, they will always be “wrong.” Like some people say we need to speak, and others say we need to be silent. Maybe it's both, but it's hard to know what the truth is, and it weighs heavy on us.

So, it feels like a trap Jesus is holding out to us. Take this yoke upon you because the burden is light. And yet we know the cost of discipleship is not small. It sounds less like a relief and a lot like more work for us. With social media and constant news cycles we know so much about the world's pain. In addition to the pain and struggles each of us deals with in our own spheres. It feels like we are the ones

batted about between the children in the marketplace. Or maybe for a modern update – the ones torn between Facebook and Twitter posts competing for our attention and action. Or between the skewed agendas of MSNBC and Fox News. Then there's Jesus telling us to take his yoke upon us too. Hmm...How do we know whose voice to listen to?

I will admit that as a city person I don't know much about yoking. Jesus uses an agricultural illustration with his disciples, assuming they would know just what he means. But I do remember this one time in MI at the Henry Ford Village, when I learned something about being yoked. At this place that is a recreated old timey village, you can ride in a wagon pulled by two huge draft horses, who are yoked together side-by-side. They even have cute names like Ted and Ned. That day the driver explained how it works between the two horses. That Ned, the less experienced horse was yoked with Ted, a more experienced one, so he could learn from Ted how to pull the weight of a wagon. And in times when one is tired or not able to pull as much, the other steps up to take on more of the burden. And if one is being lazy and holding back, the other pulls forward, encouraging the other to keep moving. They learn from one another and develop a rhythm that makes bearing the burden easier. I suddenly understood this invitation from Jesus a little better. He isn't saying that he will put a yoke on us as if he were the driver, directing us to

pull alone. He is inviting us to be yoked alongside him. To learn from him how we are to pull the weight of the world faithfully. And also when to rest a little and wait for the Spirit of the risen Christ to pull us forward, when we want to hang back and give up.

Back to *The Daily* and the interaction between the protestors in NC. The journalist narrating what she has gleaned from this video, says that she hears hopelessness in the words and the voices of the two men. She can imagine the futility the older men feel after carrying this burden for so long with little change. But then she notes for the listener that for the sake of the boy in their midst, they do not leave it there. That they must give him hope for a different future. And a possibility that he and his generation can do things differently. Otherwise he might as well burn it all down.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...”

This is as much invitation as promise. It sounds like we have a choice whether to take on this yoke or not. But the truth is that at our baptisms we were yoked with Jesus into relationship with one another, made members of the Body of Christ for the sake of the world. It can be a big task. And we might feel helpless and hopeless

to tackle any of the huge problems facing humanity at this very moment. But our faith promises that the heft of the present burden leads us to true freedom.

Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon us. And if we are all yoked together, then we are all pulling the weight with one another.

There is a modern translation of the bible called *The Message*. Sometimes it takes a hokey tone that makes me laugh. But several years ago, I came upon the translation of this passage from Matthew and it has stuck with me as a powerful reminder of Jesus' invitation. "Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

The line I hold closely is this: "Learn the unforced rhythms of grace."

Truly following Jesus' voice amid the din of competing soundbites is the work of discipleship. We get so lost that we find ourselves batted about between one false truth and another. Between one or another opinion about what we should be doing or how we should act. Between our own sense of guilt and our desire to do more.

But our faith reminds us that we are not the ones in charge, Jesus is. And that apart from Christ our work can become futile and even more burdensome. Even when

our intentions are good. If we are listening to the wrong voices instead of Jesus, we can easily slip into hopelessness and exhaustion.

Our freedom in Christ is not freedom from but freedom to.

Not freedom from the pain of the other, but freedom to enter one another's pain, knowing Jesus is alongside us and alongside them. To know that Jesus doesn't let us hang back forever but nudges and urges us toward a more beautiful future. One in which the promises of God's kingdom are fully realized. This is the hope that keeps us from burning it all down or giving up entirely.

Taking Jesus' yoke upon us is about pulling the weight of the burdens of our fellow human beings. And when we don't know how to pull, listening and learning from those who have borne the burdens before. And above all heeding the voice of Christ to follow and join him in this work.