

"The Yoke's on You"
Matthew 11:25-30
Sixth S. a. Pentecost (Prop 9)
Messiah, Boerne
July 9, 2023

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Text: Matthew 11:25-30

Dear Friends in Christ:

Historically, wooden yokes have been used by farmers to harness the power of animals for farming. Although we may be more familiar with the use of tractors, in many places in the world, horses, oxen, and water buffalo can still be found yoked together and working in the fields. For example, while traveling through Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana, I saw Amish farmers working teams of draft animals (as such pulling animals are called) in their fields. As many of you know, a yoke is a wooden bar used to connect two animals to each other in order to pull a plow, cart, or wagon. If you've ever seen the Budweiser Clydesdales in action, then you've seen draft animals yoked together to pull a beer wagon.

The yoke is a simple device that allows farmers to get more work done. Although it may seem cumbersome, for large, strong draft animals, the yoke is not heavy or uncomfortable. In fact, it's one of the smaller and lighter pieces of equipment involved in farming, but it's *vital*ly important. The yoke

allows the animals to combine their strengths and accomplish much more than either could do on their own and what would be impossible for the farmer to accomplish by him or herself.

Now, several things can happen when a team of draft animals is yoked together. First, the load may be too heavy for them to pull. Second, although the load is manageable, the team may not pull together in unison, and therefore it struggles unsuccessfully against the load. And third, the yoked, united team can pull even a very heavy load rather easily. Now, let's apply these three scenarios to Jesus' words in our text: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me . . . and you will find rest for your souls" (v 29). You see, through God's Word and in Holy Baptism, you are yoked to Christ, and yoked to Christ, you will find rest for your souls and enter eternal life in heaven.

First of all, animals are not as dumb as some people think. If the load is too heavy, for example, draft animals will stop pulling. They also aren't as likely to try very hard the next time they're hooked up to the load because they become discouraged and lose their will to pull. In a similar way, all those who try to pull the weight of the law—the guilt of failure and burden of trying to pull themselves up to God's standard—will become discouraged and lose their will to pull. God's law is an immovable object—inflexible, unyielding, crushing in its demands. Total despair is the natural result of trying to pull

the weight of the law because, as sinful human beings, it's impossible for any of us to pull it successfully.

Many people within the Christian church mistakenly think that Jesus *merely helps* us pull the load of the law, that if we cooperate with Jesus, we can pull that weight together, each of us doing our part. But this is the ancient heresy of *synergism*, and according to our foolish human wisdom, we may think *that is* the point of the yoke image in our text. But we must interpret this passage in a way that is consistent with *all* of God's revelation. For example, when some Jewish believers insisted that the Gentile Christians should "be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5), St. Peter rebuked them, asking, "Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a *yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?*" (Acts 15:10). And Jesus Himself said, "You experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with heavy burdens they can hardly carry" (Lk 11:46).

Instead, God acts *for us*, and Christ bears what is too heavy for us. According to God's good pleasure (v 26), he reveals to us the mystery of His kingdom, that through faith we receive the blessings of Jesus' perfect life, sacrificial death on the cross, and glorious resurrection from the dead. Jesus alone, abandoned by His disciples and forsaken by His Father, bore the load of sin for the whole world on the cross. Only

Christ, fully God, could pull that load, and only Jesus, fully man, could bear it on our place. He carried that entire awful weight, that *none* of it might rest on our shoulders.

Now the victory has been won, and *all* who are weary and burdened find rest in Jesus Christ by grace through faith that trusts in His merits. Meanwhile, we who are redeemed in Christ *continue to labor* in God's field, the world. The burdens we bear, however, are not jobs we perform to be saved but joyful works in service to Jesus the Messiah because we *have been* saved. They fall into the area of discipleship or *sanctification*. Like the disciples whom Jesus sent out to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom of grace, we are also yoked to Christ. With Jesus by our side, we can accomplish in God's kingdom what would be impossible for us to do alone.

Now, it seems obvious that two animals are stronger than one. However, one good horse can actually pull more than two that are not working together. The person driving the team of animals is called a teamster. He or she is responsible for the teamwork of the animals. Teamsters depend primarily on voice commands. Draft animals must rely on and trust in the commands of the teamster in order to function as a team.

It's the same with us as disciples of Christ. Straining forward alone without the command of God will be of no benefit to us. As Jesus says in our text, "All things have been handed

over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (v 27). It's impossible to know the will of God apart from the Word of God spoken to us by God's Son. In the Word of Christ we know the will of His Father and find rest and reward in following His commands.

For us who are yoked to Christ, the law of God serves to guide us in holy living. Once the awesome weight of the law has been removed, it's no longer too heavy. As a disciple, we must pull with Jesus according to the direction of His command despite our sinful nature that *still* tries to distract us and point us in the wrong direction. However, we have this assurance: "God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, *that you may be able to endure it*" (1 Cor 10:13).

Now, as mentioned previously, strong animals may not even notice the yoke, except that it keeps the two animals working as a team so that the burdens they pull seem light. It's rare to find two draft animals with the same strength. One is usually quite a bit stronger, even if they are approximately the same size. A piece of equipment called an *evener* works along with the yoke to balance the load. The *evener* can be adjusted so that the stronger animal bears the heaviest portion of the load.

Being yoked to Christ means that when this life becomes weighed down with unusually heavy burdens, or when over time the regular burdens of life become wearisome, our Lord pulls much more than half. In fact, we may have no idea just how much of our load He is carrying. Only if He were to drop it all on us—which He promises never to do—would we discover how *utterly dependent* we are on His strength. In commenting on this text, Luther said, "Christ's burden does not oppress but makes light, and itself bears rather than is borne." Jesus makes light the daily burdens of life.

Dear friends, Christ's yoke can do something for us that *no other yoke* can do: Christ's yoke bears us up and grants us eternal salvation. By means of Christ's yoke, received by faith in God's promises and in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, God forgives us *all* of our sins, gives us the Holy Spirit, and makes us a part of His family, the Church. When the going gets tough, we are assured that Christ will never ask us to pull more than *He* has empowered us to handle. You see, when the going gets tough, Christ *will carry on for us* because His yoke is easy and His burden is light. Amen.