

**“If the Yoke Fits” based on Matthew 11:16-30 and Psalm 145:8-14**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, July 9, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

In my family, I was the youngest of six children, so I did a lot of looking up. Closest to me in age was my sister, who is three years older, while my oldest brother was 16 years old when I was born. Like I said, I did a lot of looking up while I was growing up, and this put a lot of pressure on me to measure up. I was so far behind them all – I was never smart enough, or athletic enough, or funny enough, or artistic enough, or cool enough – that I struggled to find my place.

I was just an annoying little brother, desperate to fit in with them, since they are all amazing and had so much going on. In my elementary school, classes were small, from 15 to 25 kids per grade level. It was a Catholic school, so we wore uniforms every single day, unless we had Phys Ed, which meant the athletic wear of jeans and sneakers, but we could take our ties off.

The uniforms kept us from segregating based on fashion, but there were plenty of things we found to divide ourselves. So, as I’ve confessed before, I got in a lot of trouble as a kid. Every Wednesday, it seemed, I was kept after school until 5 p.m., for two hours of detention spent reading stories and answering questions about them to test my reading comprehension. By the time I finished the 7th grade, I had completed all three of the school’s modules. Each of these modules was a whole school years’ worth of work for every grade from first to 12th grade.

Looking back, I’ve said this explains why I ended up a writer and lifelong reader and learner. But at the same time, I can look back and realize I spent so much time there because I got into trouble usually for seeking some attention, that might make me better liked by my classmates. Or, often it was the case, that I was in trouble for fighting one of my classmates. Usually, this was a last resort response to some offense against me.

I’ve probably confessed enough to make my point and start tying it to the readings today, but I’ll lighten the mood, with another example. Since fighting, as it turned out, did not make me popular, my next tactic was fashion. The one advantage of being the chubbier than all your siblings were, is eventually you stop getting hand-me-downs. Those hand-me-downs were not going to fit my waistline, and this was the late 1980s and early 1990s were amazing for big people. The pants that were most popular then were overalls – worn backward like Kris Kross – and baggy pants like MC Hammer wore. One brand, Skidz, even had a fully adjustable waist. Amazing for a big guy like me.

I had an incredible assortment of brightly colored pants, tapered down at the bottom and baggy enough to hide my chubby thighs, and boy did I think I looked cool then. I’d get bright T-shirts to match, and I was ready when I switched to public school in 1991 for eighth grade. But in September of 1991, Nirvana released “Smells like Teen Spirit” and suddenly at my school, everything in my wardrobe was instantly out of style. Needless to say, I worked hard to fit in, to measure up, but at every turn, it seemed it was never enough.

I don’t share these stories to elicit your sympathy, because I know you have your own stories. Even those of you who had some measure of popularity early on, struggled with this. Eventually, I did fit in and was a part of the more popular crowd in my high school, but it didn’t really change the pressure, because then there were new measures. These included movies, music, sports, television, sex, drugs, and alcohol, all of which required choices, to set the lines over which I would cross, and the ones I would not cross in pursuit of the ever-moving goal of popularity.

As adults, we think we have gotten beyond this, but we are still setting those boundaries, those lines we are willing to cross, but now it's more than popularity. We've added to the mix wealth and comfort, power and influence. And for the lines we are willing to cross, we work hard to justify ourselves and our choices, and for the lines we are unwilling to cross, we love to judge others who do cross those lines.

Sadly, I think the categories which I and many of you did not have to worry about until we were older, are now on the plate of today's young people since they have access to all of it through their digital devices. So many are affected by the pressure to have influence on social media and are pressured to use their voice as a means to gain power, build up power, or, if we're honest, be used by power. They get with this the anxiety caused by these platforms which have taken away their comfort. There is a greater emphasis on wealth being what life is really all about.

All of these present great burdens for them to carry. They are yokes attached to their necks and shoulders at ages younger than many of us have had to carry them. This is the way the world works – every moment we are told happiness is within reach – and then when we do the things we were told to do to achieve it, to attain it, then it moves a tiny bit farther away. We learn there is one more thing to do. There is One more thing that if we just completed it, then all would be right, and that ever elusive happiness would suddenly be ours. But then we achieve that next goal, and it's not there. Our complete happiness moves out of reach yet again.

In our scripture today, Jesus promises us something different – something much better. He does not offer happiness, or popularity, or power and influence, or wealth and comfort. He offers rest. He offers an end to our exhaustion. He offers relief for our burdens. "Come to me all who are exhausted from your labors (who are weary)," he says. "(Come to me all of) you who are burdened, and I will give you rest." Jesus offers himself, the one through whom we know God.

He offers us God's presence with us through him. He is the one who being fully divine, came down to us, to be fully human, sharing in our life, sharing in our limits and challenges, only to not fit in, and he was killed, crucified by the empire as a rebel, as one who was enslaved, a nobody.

And what's more, he was handed over to these hated Roman enemies by the Judean people, who rejected Jesus so thoroughly, that even though he was one of their own, they handed him over to be killed. Believe it or not, that feeling we have about not fitting in, about feeling like we belong, doing whatever it takes to make sure we have our place where we want to be is central to the meaning of the gospel. It is essential to the meaning of the Son of God, sharing in our humanity, to live as we live, die for us, and rise again. All of this, so that we might share God's life by reflecting God's own image, empowered by the Holy Spirit to join in the ministry of Christ. His is the ministry of reconciliation, of mending bonds, because it's about all people to be one, to find a unity in all of our diversity, under one King, the Lord Jesus.

I love that the wise people who put together the lectionary readings each week, pair Jesus's words of comfort with how people criticize him and John the Baptist. However, I had to restore some verses in between that the lectionary left out, because the middle part of our reading gives us important context, namely that Jesus is not promising to bring us all happiness, nor is he saying that sin will be ignored, and anything goes. Instead, Jesus calls us to something greater – rest in him – something beyond our constant striving to fit in.

He compares the world as it was then, which is not so different from how it remains today. He compares it to children wondering why he did not dance to their flutes or mourn what they lament. The example is of the criticism of John's fasting and abstinence from alcohol, and Jesus's willingness to drink wine and eat with tax collectors and sinners, resulted in calling John demon possessed and Jesus a glutton and a drunk. In other words, you can't win for trying. Both John and Jesus are criticized by the human standard bearers. Wisdom, however, is justified by its works.

And so, Jesus laments that Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, have seen these works, and they have ignored the wisdom found in them, for they are rejecting Jesus. Meanwhile, Tyre and Sidon, Gentile cities in the former Israelite territory of Asher, which sold their own people into slavery, would fare better in judgement. As will the inhospitable Sodom, destroyed in Abraham's time. For if these places had seen what Jesus was doing, Jesus says they would have been humbled to believe.

And this is where Jesus turns in prayer to reveal who he is and his purpose in this all. Here he uses a word that we often translate as "confess," as I did today in reading it, but which for this passage is often translated as "give thanks." Jesus confesses or gives thanks that the Father has hid truth from the wise, not because the Father is cruel, but because the father loves the humble who do not puff ourselves up by what we achieve. It is pleasing to God because the wise think they know it all, while the humble can see the Father in the Son, and the humility of God to take on our humanity.

This is the set up for Jesus's call then to all of us, that we stop trying to control our world, and instead rest in him, because he is meek – his strength is not in shows of power and force – and he is humble in heart – he is not a zealous policeman waiting to catch you in sin and punish you. Rather, in him we find rest for our soul or life, our whole being or identity, because his yoke fits us, it is meant for us to carry a light burden. Again here, the word translated as "easy" is "chrestos." This is not "christos" as in Christ or anointed, but "chrestos," which means fitting, appropriate, or the right size. Indeed, if it is the right size, it is easy.

If we bear the yoke of the right size, one that we bear with Jesus as he walks with us, this is not a promise of no challenges, but the promise that we never bear anything alone. This is because he is humble enough to walk with us, having lived as one of us, only to die for us and rise again for us, empowering us by the Holy Spirit. Friends, too often we fall into the traps of this world, and we change Jesus's message and make it a burden on us, as something to achieve. More often than not, we then tend to make it a burden on others as a judgment of failure to achieve. In this, we make sin more appealing than truth.

I spoke about this last week in the burden of prosperity preaching, where the challenges of our life are blamed on a lack of faith or deep-rooted sins, and fortune is called a blessing as a reward for our faith and right living. In truth, blessings are not fortune, but that which draw us nearer to God. Sometimes these are things that the world might not consider blessings, but blessings cannot be bound by the limits of what we consider fortunate.

But burdens are placed in many more churches and by our own perceptions of God, when we forget that God loves us first. When we forget this, we lapse into our efforts to earn God's love. Burdens happen too when we idealize something, and scripture is misused to support it, like the failure of the church to support and love people who are single, by holding up married and family life as something that is the ideal when this ideal was not met by Jesus, Paul, or any apostle but Peter, and

we know what a mess Peter was. The burden happens when we hold up political opinions as part of the gospel. We act as if our interpretation of the bible in American politics, is somehow infallible and winning is more important than for us to love our neighbor as ourself and maintain bonds with people who might think differently than ourselves.

Now this is not to say family is bad or that everything going on in politics is ok just the way it is. It is not that we do not uphold anything that is good or oppose anything that is evil. But it does mean that these should not be burdens on us. These should not limit us and affect our ability to love for God and neighbor.

For the truth is that no amount of anything this world has to offer will truly bring us rest. We will always be striving for more, to clear that next hurdle, and achieve that next goal. In Christ, we do not achieve salvation by the works we do or even a prayer we say, but we find salvation that God brings to us. We find it when we rest in the God who says you're already enough.

Your popularity, your power, your influence, your comfort and your wealth – none of these things define who you are, or make you worthy of God's love. We are loved by our creator without any of these things. The Son shared our humanity out of love for us and died for us while we were still sinners, Paul says. So, when we find ourselves exhausted from our work in this world, and overburdened by the expectations we try to live into, we can pause. We can take a deep breath and remember the words of Jesus, calling us to rest, and ask ourselves which yoke fits?

Is it the one that never lets us complete the job, and forever ties us to our middle-school selves, always trying to fit in, to be enough? Does that yoke fit? Is it the yoke of religiosity, where we have one more thing to prove to God, one more expectation to meet before we are worthy of God's love? Is it the yoke that says we have to be something to be worthy of even coming to church? Is that the yoke that fits?

Or is it the yoke of Christ, who is humble and gentle, who is meek and not waiting for us to sin in order to judge us and show power over us, but wishes only that we are humble enough to trust him. If this yoke fits, wear it. Amen.