

Calvary United Methodist Church
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HOW'S YOUR YOKE?

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Children's Message:

Matthew 23:3-4

Ok, it's time for the kids. I hope we have plenty of children, or at least a few, because I can't do this one alone. No way, I can't do this alone. Come on up here and then I'm going to go down there, okay? Looking for some big chunky...you guys are little ones.

So, this is a weird looking thing and I want to know if you know what it is? It's weird looking though, isn't it? This is called a yoke. You don't know any more now than you did before, do you? This was an implement used in farming many years ago and in Bible times and it would hook two animals together, only they were usually much bigger than this. This is big enough. And the animals would put their heads through those, they are called bows. Now, I want to know if somebody wants to try to carry a bag for me. We'll lighten the load a little bit on this. Okay. What's your name? (Sarah.) Sarah, I know a lot of Sarahs...they are all good women. Now how far can you carry that? You can walk around, do whatever you want, Sarah. It's your time to shine. Good job! There is more than ten pounds of weight in that bag. I have it carefully calculated. Actually, it's nine. Good job. What did you think? (It's heavy.) Yeah, it's kind of heavy, isn't it? Anybody else want to have a go? No? Well, how do you think you could get somebody to help you with that? That thing. Isn't that weird?

Ok, I'm going to pick two volunteers. You...pardon? You've had enough? I got to tell you it's a lot easier when you are not alone. That's okay. You did your duty, Sarah, good job. Okay, I'll take the two of you on the end, because you are the biggest. And your name? (Marcus.) Marcus and... (Savannah.) Savannah. My son wanted to go to school in Savannah. I said that's too much money. You are going to wear this. Isn't that fun? It doesn't hurt. If it hurts, you tell me, okay Savannah. Put your neck in there. There you go. How is that? (Child speaks.) It's okay and weird. It's different, isn't it? Can you walk? Okay good. Okay, let's try something. Now, if this gets to be really awkward you can back out whenever you want. No accusations of child abuse here, I have my child abuse clearance act by the way.

Okay, try to walk now. Relax. Look at you! You guys are walking in step, you are both taking your right foot at the same time and your left. Can you turn around? That's a little more challenging. You are doing super! Okay, now tell me, how does it feel? (Heavy.) It feels heavy? Well, let's not keep this going then. Let's take this off. Now Marcus, I want you to hold the bag. How long do you think you can hold that? A while? How does it feel compared to being in here? (Child speaks.) Well, you messed up my whole illustration. It might feel easier for the moment, thanks, you can sit down, Savannah. It might feel easier for the moment, but for a long time, I'm not so sure it would. But the point is, thanks, Marcus, the point is that we can do more together than separately. That's supposed to make the burden easier to bear.

Now, these things are kind of tricky because I was really watching because I wanted two kids about the same size. So, if we put Sarah in here with Savannah, it would be kind of like this, wouldn't it? And if we are not even in the weight we wind up going around in circles because that's what you call unequally yoked because you got one kid small and one kid big. So you want animals, you put them in here, your horses or oxen that are about the same size. Just in case you ever want to plow a field without real equipment you want oxen because they work harder than horses, they are not quite so persnickety. Thank you, Mr. Grubb, for making this for us for this morning.

So, isn't it something? Now, what do you suppose this means in terms of our life with God? That's a trick question, isn't it? It means that sometimes things happen to us that aren't really fun. Some things are hard, but the Bible tells us, and this is all what we call a metaphor, it's a visual picture of something that has another kind of name, but the Bible tells us that if we can learn to walk with God, God will help us to bear our burden. But, did you notice, Savannah and Marcus, you guys did such a terrific job with walking, I was hoping you would mess it up a little more, because you literally stayed in step with each other and you managed to carry the weight almost evenly it looked like even though Marcus is a smidge shorter than Savannah, but that's what we want to do in our relationship with God. We want to get ourselves close to God. You see, when you put animals in this yoke, you are insuring that they are going to stay close and then they are trained to walk together and then they share the burden. Sometimes you put a little one in the other to train them, but you are insuring that they stay together and they have to learn how to work together and pull the weight together and that's what we need to do. Sometimes you get sad, friends get sad, something is going wrong, let's say one of your friends has a real sick parent or grandma in the hospital and it's a helpful thing if you can be nice to them and encourage them. That's what God wants us to do.

So, He's calling us to try and find a way to get beside someone and share their burden with them and be kind to them. I don't know if you followed the song this morning, but that's what that's about...it's about sharing burdens with people and encouraging them whenever we can because that's what it means to be part of a church. We're hoping that when we are part of a church and we care about other people that we care about them and we walk beside them and we keep the same pace and we carry the same load, we share the burden and then probably sometime they are going to have to come along side of us and share our burden and help us. Does that make sense? Good job for sticking with it.

Thank you for going along with my little game here. I know it wasn't easy, but trust me, this is a lot lighter than the real ones. This is wood. Sometimes they are made out of iron, that's a heavy metal. That would be really heavy going.

Okay, good job. You can go back to your seats.

Message:

Deuteronomy 28:45-48

So, this yoke thing has been confusing to me. Full confession: I did not grow up on a farm. I grew up in Philadelphia. Both of my parents grew up on farms in the eastern shore of Maryland. My mom was quite happy to be marrying a farmer who majored in agriculture at the University of Maryland and then he went into the Air Force and met the Lord and he had the nerve to change his career plans and decided to go into the ministry. She didn't bank on being a minister's wife. So, it was kind of interesting because all the time that we were growing up...I'm one of four kids. I was the baby for a long time and then ten years later I got shoved out of that spot, but when we were growing up we always heard that we were soft. My dad would say, "You kids are so soft. You should have grown up on a farm where you would learn how to work." He's say, "You should find out what it's like to milk the cows at 4 in the morning before you go to school." I don't know how to milk cows, I never sat on a three-legged stool and milked those cows as both of my parents did. I was actually shown one of the stools that they used and the milk cans. I don't know how to muck out the stables. I haven't even gathered eggs from chickens and I have three colleagues who teach at Messiah that think it is cool to raise their own chickens. I think they are a little nuts, but I'll buy the eggs.

So, this is the thing about farming: I'm clueless. There are a couple of things I am really smart on in the rest of the world, stuff I don't know. But I am a chip off my dad's block. We are cut from the same cloth, except my inner smart aleck is a little more developed and incisive than his, so probably about the time I was 10 or 11 and I got this line for the umpteenth millionth time: You kids should have grown up on a farm so you learned how to work... Now mind you, I had a job in a hospital by the age of 14 and I stayed in that hospital until I went to college, so I do actually know how to work. But anyway, I looked at Dad and I said, "What do you mean we should have grown up on a farm? Who moved us to Philadelphia when I was three years old? It's not like I had a choice in the matter, you know."

So, I moved to Philadelphia, our family did, and in the Philadelphia area in the 1960s, I learned how to watch my back and hopefully avoid street fights. Street fights were common in the 60s and my elder brother and sister and I all got caught in them. As a completely non-secular aside, my Dad's said, "Don't you ever start a fight," because this was common in Philly in the 60s. He said, "But if you get caught in one, don't you ever lose." I thought that was pretty good advice. But anyway, all that to say I know nothing about farms except what I heard second hand and I know nothing about yokes. I didn't until I started working on this in the fall, because I was curious.

Yokes are mentioned a lot of times in the Old Testament, 52 times in the Old Testament and 7 times in the New Testament. Now, if we could look at the slide about the Wesleyan covenant, we actually talked about this covenant in January. First of all, I love Handle's Messiah and I love that song *His Yoke is Easy and His Burden is Light* because I think they call it Miasmas, there is something fancy about the musical way it is written. I've always liked it and I've never understood it; never understood how is his yoke easy and his burden light. And we

said this in January, because this renewal service is a time for Methodists to come together at the beginning of the year annually in a time of self-examination and reflection and dedication and really rededicating ourselves to the Lord, to the relationship we have with God and we said this: I put my neck under your yoke. Grant me strength to make the burden light. Lead me and I will follow. We all said it. What does it mean?

Personally, having grown up in the church, literally the sanctuary was my playground and sometimes I would go to Dad's office when the older kids were in school. I grew up in the church but there are so many things in scripture that to me are so paradoxical and confusing, they just don't make sense.

So, what is a yoke? Let's take some time to talk about what a yoke is. It harnesses the power of animals, not to refer to our children as animals although we are all animals, but it harnesses the great power of animals and they are useful because they do that. They bring the animals together, the animals have to walk side-by-side. They have to be in sync, they have to be able to pull and Jay Grubb was kind enough to bring a great chain this morning that you can attach to that and show you how we can pull a plow, another thing I am completely ignorant about. I also heard a lot about bailing hay. My mom always got stuck on the back of the tractor to deal with the binder twine while here sister got to drive. She was never happy about that.

Another reason why the yoke is good is because it keeps the animals from goring each other. It kind of keeps them safe. It also protects others who are around them. So, there is a lot of benefit to this yoke. A lot of benefit. And a pair of oxen can pull a lot more weight than either could alone. And oxen are very useful for this. It's not done much now. I can't remember where I was over Christmas but somebody said something about farming and I said, "Can I ask you about yokes?" And he just sort of looked at me. He said, "We don't use them anymore." And I thought well, yeah, I kind of knew that, but I thought somebody did.

But the drover would usually stand on the left side of the team and give commands just by walking along the side. Now if they are horses you have to guide them, they are more pernickety and a little more strong willed, but the oxen are very docile and happy to go along with the program. So, you can walk alongside them and guide them either with visual cues or with verbal cues. And those bows need to be fitted to the individual animal, so they can be adjusted for each animal, although hopefully you are going to get animals with a similar size, similar weight, similar height, similar strength. You need them paired for their size and ability, although sometimes a younger animal would be put in one of the yokes and then trained by the older animal. They need to be equally yoked as much as possible.

And it's interesting that in 2 Corinthians 6 we see the imagery of the yoke used again when we are admonished not to be unequally yoked because in our relationships and partnerships we want to be yoked with someone of similar spiritual depth and capacity and soul searching.

But anyway, these animals have to be yoked together or they cannot perform the task that is set before them. We have a lot of tasks set before us in life, don't we? If they are not yoked like that, they will work at odds with one another, so they have to be yoked together, develop a similar cadence, like Marcus and Savannah did amazingly. It was like the just were trained in marching band or something to do their right and their left together. It was really great.

So, let's go on to the historical significance of yokes in the Old Testament. I love the Old Testament because it is vivid with imagery and I believe it lays a lot of foundation for spiritual applications that we see later in the New Testament. Some people think it is just boring; I think it is rich with imagery and lessons that we can draw from. In the Old Testament, a yoke was used as an instrument of servitude and bondage. It is also seen as a symbol of punishment. It can be negative oppression that is referred to after one people group conquers another people group and puts them under a yoke of oppression. That's what was said sometimes. And Moses was given a what-for in Deuteronomy that Becky read for us because he was giving a speech to the Israelites about consequences of sin, the consequences of not walking in a relationship with God. And you know the story of the Israelites. They are the chosen people of God and they keep getting off the path. They keep being ornery and walking away from what God has called them to, and they have to be called back again into relationship with God. So Moses is trying to call them back into this relationship again, probably to help them avoid some kind of impending disaster because if they are going to step out of this relationship with God, the Bible talks about it as cursing and blessing. And the curse could be that it could result in famine, in ill health, in defeat, in public shame or in disgrace, so the longing to God brings about blessing and walking away from God can bring about a kind of bondage to something that calls us away if we move away by choice. I don't think we always move away by choice, but sometimes we do. The Bible calls that sin, when we choose to walk away from a loving relationship with a loving God, we are making a choice that outside of His will for us.

The first question of the Westminster catechism which my minister dad, also as a farmer, he took me to the Delaware State Fair once, I think I was about 14 and taught me how to judge cattle, what they are supposed to look like, what the tail is supposed to look like. Dad was an interesting character. I'm losing my train of thought. So, he would talk a lot about this and about our responsibility to live with God and I was schooled in the Westminster catechism, because he was Presbyterian. And the first question of the Westminster catechism is what is the chief end of man? Sorry for the sexist language, but they were sexist. And the chief end of man is to love God and to fully enjoy Him forever. That's a purpose on earth, to love God and fully enjoy Him and God's love for us throughout our life.

And Moses has warned the Israelites and said, "If you don't straighten up and get back to your right relationship with God, He will put a yoke of iron on your neck until He has destroyed you." They needed some pretty stern warnings to get their act together, frequently.

So, it is interesting that a yoke in the Old Testament is servitude. So where do we move then

if we want to look at a spiritual metaphor of a yoke, because we don't want to be stuck back there in the Old Testament. We have a lot of things that we can carry as burdens. We can now. We can have a burden or a strain of finances. We can have relationship difficulties. We might have a new job or some kind of uncertainty in our employment that is certainly getting more and more common these days. We can have chronic health issues. We can have mental health issues like the young man in the video that we heard about depression and anxiety. Probably 30 to 40 percent of Americans are going to struggle with depression or anxiety. We never talk about it in church. I have a problem with that. I think we need to be open and honest about that. All of these things can drag us down emotionally. They can drag us down spiritually and they can pull us away from that close relationship with God, that relationship that should sustain us because of His love and grace and mercy in our lives.

So we want to learn more also about sharing burdens. We've got this spiritual metaphor we can work with now how do we share burdens? In the song we heard this homeless man is the one who helps a young man in despair and would you think that would happen? Most of us have preconceived notions about homeless people. Most of us think that homeless people are people who struggle with mental illness and are there of their own accord. I'm here to tell you that they are not. This young man was very depressed and didn't want to live anymore. Have you ever felt like that? I have. I remember it clearly between 1998 and 2000 when I did not want to live anymore. I just did not. And there is a long story behind that, but God did not let go of me and there were things that happened in my life to help lift that burden. And as a psychiatric nurse I just want to say medication was one of them. It doesn't fix all the problems, but it helps. Supportive caring people, because circumstances had crushed me so that life just didn't feel like it was worth getting out of bed for, except I had two kids. I thought by gum, those kids still need me.

So, we don't know who is going to come along beside of us and who is not going to come along side of us. Sometimes the people you least expect are the ones that come along side of you and bear your burden with you and then the whole bunch of really good friends you thought you could count on are nowhere to be seen. You don't get to choose where your help comes from.

And the other point I want to make is that sometimes help comes to us, someone comes to us to bear our burden and sometimes, sometime later, we may help somebody else. So, when I was married in my first marriage and we were struggling in seminary, because I was a nurse I was making more money than all the other seminary wives and we would give money to friends in seminary who were really struggling, really struggling, we could give. We went through a time period as missionaries where we didn't have two pennies to rub together and if somebody handed me a chicken to put in the freezer, I was happy.

Sometimes we give and sometimes we receive. We need the humility to move beyond those two positions and to know that that's part of being the Body of Christ. We are called to minister to one another and then to admit our own need when it comes. We are not created per-

fect and we are not created in such a manner that we do not need fellowship.

So a lot of things can cause changes in whether we need or whether we give. Sometimes they are developmental stages in life. It can be any number of things.

So, what does this mean, my yoke is easy? I had a hard time with that. How can Jesus mean his yoke easy and his burden is light? Because his yoke is a yoke of love. When we step into that yoke, we experience the love of God and the love of God, when we become in tuned with it can walk us through a lot of things if we will just move to the cadence of the Loving God who is beside us. And this is the imagery that Jesus uses in the New Testament: the yoke is easy and my burden is light, but we have to ask the Lord to walk beside us, don't we? We can't carry that bag all alone. Sarah made it look not too difficult, but we are not meant to carry our burdens alone. We are meant to share them. Our yoke is fitted just for us. These yokes were fitted to the animal that was carrying it.

1 Corinthians 10 says that God will not put us up against any temptation more than we can handle. So the things that we go through in our lives are things that we can get through. You don't always feel like it when you are going through it, but it is fitted to your needs and to the goals in your life to move forward. When we were in London and had all kinds of church conflict, Mary Mensa would call me every day and say, "God has called you here for a difficult job. You are doing God's work. Hang in there. Stay close to God. You are doing God's work. This is boot camp, God is training you and will not waste this training." And all I could think was: Mary, if this is boot camp, I'm skipping the war. Thank you very much. I don't want to do that.

But God was training me for church conflict that I helped navigate twenty years later when we returned to the United States. That yoke was fitted to train me to walk through that kind of difficulty because I have been involved in a lot of church leadership along the way.

So, if we yoke ourselves to God, we walk in step so that love and grace of God can guide us and protect us and be a companion for us. So, this idea of my yoke being easy...I have a friend who teaches at Lebanon Valley College and she writes a blog called B flat Christian. And I want to share on the next slide these ideas that came from Dr. Lister:

Look beside you. If you are thinking about yourself in a spiritual yoke with God...we are going to do this according to the Trinity. We have a Trinity to think of in our walk of faith. Look beside you and picture Jesus in that yoke with you, walking with you as your companion, pulling your burden with you, not leaving you alone to pull that burden, but pulling it with you.

Look behind you and imagine that God is guiding because God does guide. Love, mercy, grace, sustain us through that guiding process, sometimes through difficult terrain, but we are never alone. We are never alone if we are walking in the yoke with that yoke of love from

Jesus, then it becomes an easy yoke and the burden is easier to bear.

Picture the Holy Spirit in front of you, calling and wooing. You know the Spirit of God is not manipulative or demanding. The Holy Spirit of God calls and woos us into relationship with God. Picture that Holy Spirit wooing you...one more step, just one more step. You can do one more step. And when I was a therapist, this is one thing I would say to clients: You are in a dark place. My job is to help you see little lights on the pathway. I can see them even though you cannot. Just one more step. Just do one step this week, don't think about the whole journey.

So, think about the Holy Spirit guiding you. We may feel weak. We may feel vulnerable but we can choose the harness that we step into. We can choose to be in a harness with the powerful love of God that will enable us to do more than we can do on our own.

So, how is your yoke? Is your yoke heavy? Are you burdened and weary? Can you give it over, can you invite the Lord to walk in the yoke with you, to experience that love and grace and mercy that waits for you, that woos you and encourages you every step of the way in that loving and guiding process? I encourage you to find the place in your life where there is peace in your soul and you can be still and sit and listen for the wooing of God that will bless you with love and sustenance.