

5th Sunday after Pentecost, yr. a, 7/5/2020
Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19,25-30
Of Rest and Yokes – Rev. Dr. Deborah M. Jenks

Why is it that as children it seemed as if we had all the time in the world, while as adults, it often seems as if we have no time at all, or that there is never enough time? I imagine it has to do with how burdened we feel. The fuller our living is with things we need to do, have to do, even want to do, the less time we have and the more burdened we feel. If there's one thing that I associate with childhood, it's a kind of freedom from responsibilities, the freedom to play, the freedom to live in the moment and as our interest moves us. That childhood sense of freedom though may be a bit idealized. Even children can feel burdened with all the stuff they do and want to do and need to do.

It can seem as if the freedom we so cherish becomes an oppressive burden as we pursue all possible options for the fulfillment of our desires and enthusiasms. We become resentful of what impedes our freedom. We become anxious about many things – what we should eat, what we should wear, what we want or think we need to make life good and to be all that we can be. I can often find myself caught up in a kind of inner conflict, a double bind; while doing one thing, I'm already thinking about something else I have to do, while having fun, I'm thinking about the work I have to do, while working I can find myself thinking about what I'm going to do when I have some free time. The consequence of this double-mindedness is that sometimes I can find myself not fully engaged in

any one thing; I'm not always fully committed to any choice I make or action I take.

This inner conflict is like Paul describes in Romans 7, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil that I do not want is what I do." Jesus in our reading from Matthew describes this tendency in us to not be fully in the moment but anxious and distracted by other things when he tells the crowds. He says to us: To what will I compare this generation? They are like spoiled children whining to each other or to their parents, "We wanted to do this, but you went and did that! We wanted to ... but you made us ...!" Its as if our freedom gets reduced to this kind of whining, complaining, and stubbornness.

But then Jesus gives this graceful, welcome invitation to freedom from our anxiousness and double-mindedness. "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light."

When I was a kid these words of Jesus were spoken aloud just about every Sunday as an invitation – to me and to all – to receive God's forgiveness, receive God's peace, receive the Bread and Cup of Communion in Jesus. "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavily laden, and I will give you rest

... “ Even now as I say the words they evoke in me feelings of love, warmth, comfort and a kind of satisfaction. Like when we took our bathes – washing away the dirt of the day, put on our pajamas, and settled down for a bedtime story. Like when it was supper time and we sat together at the table, gave thanks, and ate together.

Jesus’ words of invitation, compassion, forgiveness invite us, tells us that we can let go of all that distracts and burdens us and our world, and make a new beginning, a fresh start. In these words of Jesus we have a solution to our double-mindedness and distractions, a gift of release from the conflict of interests and anxious concerns of our lives. With these words, Jesus answers Paul’s dilemma of doing the evil that he doesn’t want to do and not doing the good he desires to do.

When we hear the word, “yoke” I think often we see the image of a collar laid on the necks of slaves; an image of constraint, oppression, and lack of freedom. Not an image for gentleness and lightened burdens. I never realized that a yoke could be any kind of a positive image until I saw a team of oxen pulling at the Fryeburg Fair. The yoke, perfectly fitted across their shoulders, linking them together, amplified their strength, allowed them to work together, and made their burden lighter than it would have been otherwise. They were able to work together in a single purpose rather than at cross-purposes and able to do far more together than they ever could separately.

To accept Jesus' invitation to come to him, to take his yoke upon us and learn from him, is to join our lives with his and with one another for the purpose of doing God's work and living our lives with a kind of freedom from all the burdens that we place upon ourselves and one another. By yoking our lives with Jesus, joining our living with the love and will of God, we discover that our burdens are lightened. The work is not solely dependent on us and on the things which we find to be busy with.

As Paul tells us in Romans, the reality of our lives is that we turn God's gift of freedom and life into all kinds of burdens for ourselves and one another. But God says to us in God's Son Jesus, "I love you anyway. Even when you complain and don't listen and decide to go your own way and then try to get out of the consequences, I love you no matter what, and I show you my love by forgiving you."

In God's grace of forgiveness we are invited to take on the yoke of Jesus – joined with him, joined with God – so that we can be freed from all pretensions and self-imposed expectations, because God loves me as me, and you as you. In accepting this gracious gift of love and forgiveness, we are freed to be the children of God we are, finding rest for our souls, and able to live and work with that singleness of mind that comes from knowing we are loved and have all the time we need. Amen.

