

**Sunday, July 5, 2020**  
**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 9 (Year A)**

Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/718348335646045/>

*(Sermon begins at about 14:20)*

**“Take My Yoke Upon You”**

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11.28). How timely these words are. How in need we are of hearing them.

Even in normal times—you remember, that time BC: Before COVID—we were already weary and carried heavy burdens. The demands of work, with the pressures to meet unreasonable deadlines, to continually produce more and more. For some, the struggle to even just find employment. The demands of family life and running a household. The challenge of balancing work and home life. Concerns about finances—how to make ends meet, let alone how to save enough to hopefully retire one day. Struggles with health issues—both our own, as well as caring for loved ones with their own health concerns. For those who have lost a spouse, struggling with loneliness, and trying to build a new life without the one you thought you would spend the rest of your life with. For those who are older, being shut-in and having limited social contact.

That was normal stuff even before. And then COVID-19 hit, adding a whole new list of burdens to further weary our already exhausted selves. For some, the added pressure of losing a job or being furloughed, bringing added financial strain. For some, having to adapt to working at home and finding new ways to do old familiar tasks. For some, having to figure out how to work at home while also educating their children. For some, having to self-isolate or to have to be separated from a loved one who is sick. For some, the difficulty of having social contact—at least, in-person contact—cut off. For some, if not most, worrying about the long-term economic impacts. For all of us, worries about coming into contact with someone who might be sick. Inconveniences of having to wait in line just to get into stores, only to find shelves bare and what we want or need unavailable (thankfully that has eased some). Always having to be aware of and maintaining social distancing. Always having to remember to wear a mask when leaving home. Continually having to wash our hands or use hand sanitizer. Worrying about where to find toilet paper. And as this continues on, day after day, week after week, month after month, worries about when, if ever, this will ever stop. Worries about what will happen if there is a major spike, let alone a second wave.

All of this on top of, contributing to, the burdens we already had to carry. Contributing to our wearied condition. So, when Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,” we can’t help but take notice. Our hearts cannot help but skip a beat. Because isn’t that what we all want? Someone to ease some of the burden. Someone to give us a little respite from the insanity of our lives. Lives that are more insane now

than they were BC. It's as if Jesus is recognizing that we are near the breaking point. That we can't take much more of this.

But the next part, at first glance, may seem a little bit of a disconnect. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me" (Mt 11.29a). Just what we need. Another yoke. More burden.

To really understand what Jesus means by this, we need to go back to the Gospel text. The first part of the Gospel reading alludes to the rejection and serious misunderstanding both Jesus and John the Baptist experienced during the course of their ministries. "They"—whoever "they" were—despise Jesus' inclusiveness and mercy shown to tax collectors and other sinners. Yet, God reveals Jesus' true identity and true mission, not to the powerful and elite of his day, but to everyday folk and to the marginalized. The very ones who are most burdened by and weary from their day-to-day existence.

In bidding those who carry heavy burdens to come to him, Jesus is referring to those of his own day who are unduly burdened by the heavy demands placed upon them by the Pharisees—by their interpretation, or mis-interpretation, of God's will. Those who are at the same time burdened by Roman oppression. Both of these forming a heavy yoke placed on the necks of the people.

To relieve this heavy burden placed from outside, Jesus suggests something counterintuitive. "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 is light" (Mt 11.29-30). Notice that there is no talk of throwing off the yoke of oppression laid upon their necks by the Pharisees and the Romans. Instead, Jesus says to take on an additional yoke.

While the image of "yoke" was often used in Jesus' time to denote harsh, even oppressive rule, this imagery was undoubtedly carefully chosen to convey a particular image, a particular meaning. One that would have been easily understood by his original hearers, but which is generally lost on those of us who do not live in an agrarian society. I know I've explained the concept of the yoke before, but it bears repeating to remind us what Jesus is really getting at. When we hear "yoke," we rightly think of a heavy wooden contraption placed on the shoulders of an ox so it can bear a heavy burden, such as pulling a plow or a cart. The important thing to note is that a yoke was not generally used on a single ox, but rather on a pair of oxen. This casts the imagery in a different light. Although people in our day and age with little or no connection to farming methods of the past normally consider a yoke a heavy burden borne by the oxen, this is actually not the case.

The yoke is meant to be a means of bearing burden, of facilitating the work to be done by the animals. A yoke is very carefully carved and tailored to fit the two animals to be yoked together. It must be strong enough to hold them together so the less dominant animal cannot wiggle around and get injured. And it must fit precisely so that it does not chafe or damage either animal. The yoke is a blessing to the weaker, younger, or less attentive animal because the dominant one calms him and keeps him at the task at hand instead of wandering off task and potentially getting in trouble. Or worse yet, harming itself or its partner. Furthermore, by keeping the less attentive animal calm and focused on the task at hand, it is also spared

punishment for the errors it would otherwise make. This in turn helps the dominant animal because its companion's efforts are focused on the task at hand. It lightens the work to be done. With the use of the yoke, the more dominant animal guides the less dominant one, teaching it how to properly do the work that needs to be done. The work that is shared by the two.

This understanding of how the yoke works – how the yoke eases the work to be done – casts Jesus' comments in a different light. "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 is light." Of course, the presumption is that the hearer—even those of us who hear this in our own time—are the younger, less experienced, perhaps even less attentive of the pair. Who serves as the older, more experienced, more attentive of the pair is perhaps less important to the analogy. What is important is the yoke itself.

When used on oxen, a yoke is a means of easing burden to make the work they must do easier, more bearable. When applied to us and our burdens, as Jesus does in today's Gospel, we need to remember that his yoke is not a panacea. It is not a promise to take away our burdens. The yoke does not take away the work. The yoke—Jesus' yoke—is meant to be a means of making our own burdens more bearable.

In offering his own yoke, Jesus is offering a different way. A different approach to dealing with that which burdens us. Because of his very nature, one who is "gentle and humble in heart," he offers a yoke that is the antithesis of that placed on the people by the Pharisees and the Roman Empire. He is offering a yoke that is the antithesis what we currently carry, placed on us by personal and societal expectations, as well as circumstances that are often beyond our control. He offers a yoke that, rather than being burdensome, backbreaking, and even soul-crushing, is instead the yoke of God's ways. Ways that are rooted in God's love and mercy. A yoke that is crafted on the love of others. A yoke that guides us into the love of others as the very means of easing our own burdens.

There are so many ways that we as Christians and as a Christian community carry the yoke Jesus offers. I would argue that, since the yoke symbolizes the ways of Christ, there are so many ways that we as Christians and particularly as a Christian community—that we as the Body of Christ—embody and employ that yoke. Through our care for one another, where we reach out and seek to share, or at least lessen, the burdens borne by our sisters and brothers. Some of these are particularly obvious, such as our feeding ministries—the Food Pantry and Feed My Lambs—where we help to ease the burden borne by those who are in need of a little extra help just to meet basic human necessities. Through our outreach programs where we seek to ease the burdens of others through the giving of ourselves and of our bounty. Through the simple act of reaching out to those in our parish family who are isolated and in need of human contact and the assurance that they are not alone and that others do indeed care about them and their wellbeing. These are just a few forms Jesus' yoke manifests itself. Perhaps you can think of other examples from your own experience.

Yes, all these things do, in a way, add an additional burden to our own lives. Actions that require additional time on our part. That require giving of our own resources. That require

giving yet more of ourselves. But this yoke, as Jesus tells us, is easy. The additional burden we take on, as Jesus tells us, is light. Precisely because this yoke is crafted out of love and mercy and compassion. A yoke that is formed and custom-fitted just for us based on God's love and mercy and compassion for each of us.

But Jesus is true to his word. It is one of the great mysteries of our Christian life and ministry. This yoke, and the additional burden we take on with it, is somehow easy and light. A yoke that is easy to carry because that is who we are as the Body of Christ. Easing and lightening the burdens of those to whom we minister, and in the process—and this is the miraculous part—somehow easing and lightening our own burdens as well. For when we more fully participate in the ministry of Christ, when we more fully live into what it means to be the Body of Christ, we find rest in the Holy Spirit, who energizes, guides, and sustains us. In the process, our own spirits are reenergized and rejuvenated, making our own burdens seem not so heavy, and just that much easier to bear.