

Sunday, July 9, 2023
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)

Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1443942313039156>

(Sermon begins at about 17:35)

“Expectations”

For the last few weeks, we have been exploring what is sometimes referred to as Jesus’ mission discourse. Think of it as Jesus’ orientation to his newly assembled disciples, as he prepares them for a life of ministry. After commissioning them to go out and do ministry in his name, he instructs the Twelve on what they can expect as they engage in ministry and how to respond in various situations. Now he has finished those instructions. But he does not send the Twelve out on their own, as one might expect. Not just yet. They still need more formation. That will come in the form of on-the-job training. Orientation complete, they will now spend time observing and working with Jesus as he engages in ministry. All in preparation for the time when he will have to leave them—and leave them to continue the work on his behalf.

Today’s Gospel outlines the first lesson in this new phase of their on-the-job training. One that is prompted by Jesus receiving communications from John the Baptist, inquiring, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” To which Jesus responds, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” (Mt 11.3-5). Jesus then makes this a teaching moment for his disciples and the gathered crowd. He recognizes that the reason for John’s inquiry is that the way Jesus himself engages in ministry is, at times, counter to what many expect of a religious teacher. Some would even consider his form of ministry unorthodox. Defying conventional expectations.

Expectations. An issue that will prove to be a continuing theme throughout Jesus’ life and ministry. Or more accurately, how the way God operates, as reflected in what Jesus does, how he does it, and who he ministers to, does not match prevailing societal or religious expectations. Jesus responds to this by criticizing his critics. Jesus notes that they are like children who are pouting because things are not going as they expect: “calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’” He uses the example of John the Baptist—certainly a colorful character who did not meet any of society’s expectations. Or rather, the expectations that had been instilled in them by the religious authorities of the day. Those who felt that Jesus, and John the Baptist before him, did not behave or perform the way they thought they should. As religious teachers, John and Jesus should have been hanging out with those who are pure and righteous, with those who are devout adherents to the law. But instead, they hang out with sinners and tax collectors. As a result of how he engaged in ministry, John the Baptist was considered by some to be a demon. And because of who Jesus ministered to, he himself was considered by many to be “a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”

Rather than view these perceptions as a liability, Jesus views this as an asset, as a blessing. That the hostility and rejection he encounters only serves to call attention to just what it is that he is doing. That he is ruffling feathers by calling attention to the social injustices of the day: calling attention to the fact that the religious practices promulgated by the temple authorities do not always serve to bring God's people together as intended, but often serve to marginalize those who do not fit neatly in predefined categories of who is pure and righteous, and who is unclean and a sinner. Of who is in and who is out. Perpetuating the practice of exclusivity as opposed to the ideal of inclusivity. Jesus sees that he has been sent by God, not to minister to those who are viewed as the wise and intelligent—the religious authorities—but to minister to those who have been marginalized by those same authorities. In short, to use a term from our own time, to empower those who are looked down upon and pushed to the margins by those in positions of wealth, power, and privilege. If Jesus is upsetting the powers-that-be, if he is catching the attention of those who are otherwise complacent, then he must be doing something right.

And now that he has their attention, he delivers the crux of his message. He extends an invitation. "Come to me, all you that are weary and 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 is light." Very comforting words to those of us who have willingly taken up Jesus' yoke and understand how Jesus operates. But a startling, even radical, message to those who originally heard these words.

In Jesus' time, the yoke was often used as a symbol for the Empire and for the burden of imperial rule. Those who heard Jesus speak these words would have known exactly what he was offering. Those who were weary and burdened by the excessive and taxing demands of the Empire were always on the lookout for relief. To offer a yoke that would be easier and lighter than the one they already lived under would have been an intriguing, even enticing invitation to Jesus' audience.

And while the image of yoke was often associated with imperial rule, there was also an implied jab at the religious authorities, as well. Highlighting Jesus' position that religious authorities were also placing their own burdensome yoke on the people. The yoke of an oppressive interpretation of God's laws which placed undue burden particularly on the poor and marginalized. What Jesus was offering was a new interpretation, a reframing, of the yoke that is God's laws. Given the political and religious yokes the people were under, Jesus' offer, while vague, would certainly have been received with the hopefulness intended, and as something worth considering. Enough so that many would have said, "You've got my attention, I'm listening."

To our ears, any yoke would still sound burdensome. And while we do use the term yoke as a symbol for a burden to be carried, that was not at all the image Jesus was seeking to convey. In actuality, a yoke is not meant to be a burden at all, but rather to be a device to ease burden. To make burdens more bearable. At least, when used properly. I know I've explained the concept of the yoke before, but it bears repeating as a reminder of what Jesus is really getting at. When we hear "yoke," we think of the heavy wooden contraption placed on the shoulders of an ox so it can engage in its labor. The important thing to note is that a yoke was not generally used on a single ox, but rather on a pair of oxen. The yoke is meant to be a device to facilitate the work

done by the animals. A yoke is tailored and adjusted 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 harm either animal. The yoke is a blessing to the weaker, younger, or less attentive animal because the dominant one calms him and keeps him from wandering off task and potentially getting in trouble or harming itself or its partner. The yoke also helps keep the less attentive animal calm and focused on the task at hand. 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. A yoke is a means of making 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 his yoke is not a promise to take away our burdens. The yoke does not take away the work. Jesus' yoke is 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 very opposite of that placed on the people by the Pharisees and the Roman Empire. He is offering himself as a yoked partner in whatever it is 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.

In this sense, the yoke that Jesus offers is meant to reframe expectations about who God is, about who Jesus is, and about what is expected of us. Thanks to the temple authorities, the people to whom Jesus was ministering during his earthly ministry were given the distinct impression that God's yoke was a burden—filled with religious hoops to jump through that were certainly an extra, often onerous, burden for those who were already on the margins. But Jesus says, no, that is not who God is. God seeks to ease our burdens, not add to them. Literally shifting the burden from the people's shoulders to Christ's. A shift in expectations—one that was good news to the people of Jesus' time.

After two thousand years of Christianity, we have a different perspective from those first century followers of Jesus. Our lives of faith are predicated on the fact that Jesus, that God, do not place expectations on us that add to our burden, but rather seek to ease our burdens. But that does not let us off the hook. Rather, there is a shift in expectations. Now, we are the Body of Christ active in the world. Which means, where possible, we are to take on a different yoke. One that will help ease the burden of others who may be unduly weighed down. Just as Christ has eased our own burdens. Even as we through our own lives of mission and ministry seek to be the yoke, to ease the burden for others. Yes, ministry can have its challenges. Easing the burden for others can be tiring physically. But we also know that it does have a way of energizing us, providing rest for our souls, just as Jesus promises. All because we do this sacred work in partnership with him. Who in turn makes the work we do in his name not a burden, but an act of love that is easy and light.