

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Zechariah 9:9-12

Psalms 145:8-14

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

07/09/2023

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

[Jesus spoke to the crowd saying:] 16“To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 17‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ 18For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; 19the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” 25At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; 26yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. 28“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

The Gospel of Our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Discipleship

Good morning! What's the heaviest thing that you've ever lifted? I know a lot of you have military experience, and the amount of gear they make you carry is certainly pretty heavy. If you've helped Megan and me move, the answer is probably a box of my books. OR if you're really unlucky, maybe you've been tricked into helping move a piano. I'm pretty sure that nobody has ever done that job twice, at least not willingly. I've had to carry some heavy stuff for my family business, but fortunately, I've never had to try and move a burial vault. Crummitt & Son, the business in Martins Ferry, Ohio, that was started by my great-grandfather, makes concrete burial vaults. When you die you go into a casket, and the casket goes into the burial vault, and the burial vault goes into the ground.

Thankfully, we get these burial vaults to the grave via a motorized trailer that moves the 2,000 lb vault to the grave. The trailers are pretty amazing, a giant I-beam can slide out to use a small crane to lift the vault over the grave and the engine provides enough power to steer/drive the trailer to the grave.

Well on one especially beautiful day in a summer several years ago my brother and I were sent on our own funeral. We hadn't done much else at the cemeteries besides help, so I was a little nervous. We got the spot, thought through a plan, and it was decided that I would unhook the trailer and bring the vault down to the grave while my brother began setting everything else up. I unhooked the trailer, moved it back, and began backing it down the hill. You never got downhill of a trailer, a lesson that

was soon reinforced in my head forever. As I set off down the hill, the trailer did the unthinkable... it kicked out of gear into neutral. It all happened in slow motion: the trailer took off down the hill, I screamed my brother's name, "RICK!!!!" As it gained speed I realized there was nothing for a long way that was going to stop this thing. Fortunately, one of the tires caught the very corner of the hole, which kicked it sideways and snapped the shaft for the front wheel which brought it to a stop. It didn't roll, thank God! The cemetery also had a rule that forbade standing grave-markers, so I was able to avoid a costly replacement. My brother was fine, I was fine, and nobody got hurt. Our foreman was able to arrive in time with a replacement trailer and vault to save the day.

All in all, I got off lucky. It was a sobering reminder that no matter how powerful the tool, it can always break. Which is what a yoke is, a tool. For all the differences that exist between them, a yoke and a vault trailer are both tools that facilitate the moving of heavy equipment. A yoke is the piece of wood that goes across the shoulders of an animal that distributes the weight and allows it to pull heavy loads.

Which brings us to the final two verses of our Gospel reading today: *"29 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. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."* Comforting words, words we often hear at funerals. What is so strange is that these words of comfort come after a long section of the Gospel where Jesus seems to paint a pretty grim picture of what it means to be a disciple. Even in the Gospel lesson today it can feel like a strange way to end the text.

Let's unpack the rest of the lesson and see if it can give us some help. It's a strange story. Clearly it isn't the first pick for best lectionary reading.

The text begins with the strange comparisons to children in a marketplace. “*17 We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.*” Jesus compares them to children who complain when they don’t get their way. The child thinks that just because they play a tune, you need to dance, that when they're sad, you need to be sad too. When we aren’t the child throws a fit. It’s not how I would try to win over the crowd, but Jesus can do whatever he wants.

Next he vents his frustration, and it’s this frustration that makes the comparisons just before a little more understandable. Jesus is angry because people never seem to be happy. When John the Baptist came he ate nothing but locusts and wild honey, and the people complained that he was so strange and different. But when Jesus shows up and does the exact opposite, which you would think is what they want, they STILL complain... Some people just won’t ever be happy.

Which brings us to our final two verses. It can seem like a swift departure from the focus of the rest of the story, but that’s because we’re misunderstanding the text. If you’re like me, you can’t help but think that this being a Christian is tough stuff. That’s what Paul is writing about in our lesson from Romans. “I don’t do the thing I want to do, but I do the complete opposite!” So how can Jesus call the job easy? It seems we’re coming at the story all wrong. Take a listen to the words of my man Douglas R. A. Hare: “*Jesus’ yoke is called ‘easy.’ The underlying Greek word means ‘kind.’ A good yoke is one that is carefully shaped so that there will be a minimum of chafing.*”¹ D. J. Harrington writes that “*The image is that of an animal harnessed to do work; the yoke provides discipline and direction.*”²

¹ Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 129.

² Harrington, Daniel J. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991. p. 168.

And another commentator writes that *“Like ‘rest,’ the ‘easy’ yoke of Jesus is not an invitation to a life of ease, but of deliverance from the artificial burdens of human religion, which Matthew sees as a barrier to the true fellowship of the Kingdom of God.”*³

I don’t know about you, but that completely changes the way I look at the lesson. We’ve misunderstood Jesus, equating an easy yoke with no yoke at all. What’s the point of life without a calling, with no mission or direction? No, Jesus doesn’t call us to a life of sloth, but to a work that while still never easy, nevertheless helps shield us from absolute pain.

Being a Christian isn’t an easy calling. In today’s Gospel we are reminded that God has called all of us to a work that is important, a work that provides direction and meaning in a world that can so often seem impossibly confusing. A work that leads us down a path towards the Kindom of God, where all good things find their place. Amen.

³ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 191.