

July 9, 2017, 5th Sunday after Pentecost

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Focus: Jesus takes the weight off our shoulders.

Imagine for a minute, you have to carry 15 pounds with you all the time. Maybe you're like me in high school and have a ton of 20-year-old textbooks to lug around (school's coming soon, folks!). Maybe it's a heavy bag of groceries you have to walk to and fro. Or maybe you're on a long hiking or camping trip. Maybe you're in the military and have to march miles with a huge bag on your back. Or a reality that all too many experience that some of us might not even think of right away: imagine you are homeless and you have to push around all your worldly possessions on a daily basis in a big bag or in a shopping cart. At the end of a long day of hauling around that 15 pounds—or even more--, all that stuff, all that **weight**, how do you think you would feel? Probably not great, right? Probably you wouldn't turn down a good massage, or, as my wife loves, lying in bed with her "heaty pad" around her shoulders. All that weight on your shoulders drags you down.

Today Jesus talks about carrying weight on your shoulders through a yoke. Now if you're like me and don't use a yoke every day, it's a piece of wood used to harness two animals together so that they can work together, usually pulling a plough or a wagon behind them.

But what Jesus is talking about when he says "take my yoke upon you" is something different. Because of course we know that he can't be literally talking about wearing a wooden yoke with us. No, by the time Jesus is talking, people in Israel use the word "yoke" to talk about **the teaching of a prophet**.

Now this might not make much sense. A yoke is designed to put animals to work, to hard manual labor. What does that have to do with teaching? Well, the thing is, most of what the prophets were teaching wasn't just spiritual advice. Prophets gave rules about how to live in this world. They told you how many times a day you had to wake up or stop what you're doing to pray. They told you how much of your stuff you had to give to the Temple. They told you what you could eat or not eat. A prophet might tell you to fast—or not to eat, or sometimes even drink altogether. A prophet told you how to dress. A prophet told you what type of person you could marry. A prophet told you what kind of person was righteous enough for you to associate with.

Now for the prophets, and for many people, this was a good thing. It was teaching you how to obey God's good commandments! But imagine if you carried around a voice in your head all the time telling you exactly what you had to do, what you couldn't do. That would be a heavy yoke to bear. That heavy weight on your shoulders all the time would drag you down, wouldn't it?

Now today we don't really have a ton of prophets. But I think this idea of having to carry a yoke around our shoulders is still very real today. This story is **not just about** the yokes of prophets' teachings. This story is also about the yokes we wear today. This story is about every yoke that people in the world have ever tried to put on you. This story is about:

--If you have ever lived day-to-day thinking you'd never be good enough for someone: a father or mother or a spouse

--All the images in the media that make girls think their bodies are ugly

- Boys who grow up thinking that being tough means never admitting when you hurt or have a problem
- People who try to tell you who you can hang out with or who you are allowed to love
- Commercials that convince you that what you've got isn't good enough and you need more
- The rat race: for money or power or self-esteem
- Self-expectations that don't allow for failure
- When people stereotype you or pigeonhole you into categories or cut you down
- Religions or churches that scare or guilt you into belief or attendance
- People who won't forgive you
- Consciences that won't forgive themselves

These are yokes. They are the monkeys on our back that we carry around with us. Those burdens that drag us down from being the people that God created in his image for abundant life. And there are so many more. I probably haven't named a third of the yokes that any one of us here is carrying around. Sometimes we don't even know what that yoke is that we've been carrying around. We've been carrying it around so long that we don't even know what it feels like to walk free anymore until we finally take it off.

Take. It. Off.

That is Jesus's message today. He comes to take those yokes off our shoulders, the weight that is dragging us down. Because he knows that those yokes that we are carrying around will never be satisfied. We'll never be good enough to meet the standards of their teaching, to answer the siren calls of their nagging. And we shouldn't try. They are simply **dead weight**, dead weight that was shown for the death it was on the cross when Jesus bore all of it upon his shoulders, until it died with him. But unlike Jesus, those dead, life-sucking, weighty yokes stayed dead: they are still buried in a tomb outside Jerusalem to this day. Today, Jesus tells you, you can let go, you can breathe. Jesus's humble heart is a pillow where our souls can finally find rest.

Jesus comes to offer a different sort of yoke. Imagine for a minute, you are bearing a different sort of weight. Maybe it's still heavy. Maybe it's still fifteen pounds or more! But this time it's something different. This time the weight you are carrying is a child in a pouch. This time the weight you are holding is a beloved pet. This time the weight you are carrying is your loved one falling asleep in your arms. Now mathematically speaking, that's still a burden. If you put that weight on the scale, it's still going to ring up. But there's something changed, isn't there? This is not dead weight—no! This is a yoke of love. This is the yoke of someone who loves us and whom we love in return.

That is the yoke that Christ asks us to bear on our shoulders. He says his burden is light, not because it doesn't weigh. Oh, it does. We will pass around the offering plate in a little bit for his mission in the world, and I won't deny that it weighs. His yoke weighs when you stand up with the weak and oppressed. His yoke weighs when you continue to trust when trials in our lives come. But Jesus's is a life-giving yoke, a living weight. A living weight because upon that yoke is hitched a wagon full of blessings and mercies. We are carrying a wagon bearing upon it the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, to deliver to a hungry world. Riding the wagon are all those whose work is done, and those not yet old enough to work or walk themselves who someday will wear this yoke, too. No one is excluded: not gluttons or drunkards or addicts or tax-collectors or sinners: Jesus is their friend. And not driving the wagon, but carrying it here with us, pulling

more than his share of the weight, is Jesus Christ, who has already borne the heavy burden of Calvary and the cross. He is the one yoked always beside us, no matter where we try to stray, calling us back to him, clinging to us, and leading us onward.

The destination of this wagon is the kingdom of heaven. That is still a long way ahead. There are still so many more yokes that the world is going to try to place on your shoulders. But Jesus gives us courage. In a world that can be rough, he is gentle. In a world that rewards the proud and strong, he is humble of heart. In a 24/7 world of cities that never sleep, he offers us rest. And in a world where we might feel like we're on our own, he yokes himself beside us. His ways might seem unfamiliar to the world, but they are so simple that he can reveal them to infants in baptism, and so costly that he gave his life on the cross. And from our baptism to the hour of our own death, he walks with us, he works with us, and he bears every burden with us as a labor of his love. For every step, he, our gentle and humble-hearted teacher, is with us until we reach our final place of rest on a day gladly awaited.. **Amen.**