

July 5th, 2020 Sermon notes – 5th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 24:34-38,42-49,58-67; Psalm 45:11-18; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19,25-30

“The Easy Yoke: a Labour of Love”

This certainly is a changed world. We are all struggling through this new era of restrictions and change from “how things used to be”. We are emotionally and mentally deprived of once-accustomed personal contact. We are restricted about when and where and how we can travel and what we can do. Add to that the burden of health crises, personal or familial, not just from the viral pandemic but those that were common before Covid 19 and the stress of isolation added into the mix. Increasing is the burden of financial insecurity from loss of employment and/or global economic instability due to the pandemic. The future is uncertain and looking potentially dismal. We are all stressed – we are all burdened. Tension is in the air! It is no wonder that racial discrimination has been moved to the forefront of social consciousness through confrontation – thankfully, now moving from violence towards much needed dialogue. People are at their breaking point!

So how are many people reacting? It is not surprising that most people are yearning for things to return to “normal” – to the way they were before. But think about that. Is that not just a little strange? Have they forgotten the stresses and burdens of how things were? Is the avaricious consumerism, driven by “Fear Of Missing Out”, so engrained in our lifestyle that we have become indifferent to some of the consequences: the socio-economic inequities and the damage to the environment that is the uncomfortable baggage that tags along? And it seems some are so eager for the return to that lifestyle that they put a priority on financial security – getting the economy back on track – over the safety and security of themselves and others, willfully disregarding both common sense and advice or regulations of authorities.

Some things seem to never change. Some people just cannot ever be pleased. How many thousands of years ago was it put this way? “It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you and you did not dance; we sang a dirge (tr. we wailed), and you did not mourn.’” Of course Jesus was referring to the people of that day who pointed at John the Baptist’s ascetic lifestyle, labelling him “mad” because of it and His own celebratory lifestyle, labelling Him a “glutton” and a “drunkard”. Damned if you do. Damned if you don’t. But in his metaphorical style, Jesus was also pointing at that generation to show them how much they had missed the point, how they were oblivious to the reality that what John the Baptist and Jesus were about was a much bigger thing than about “how they played the game.” Like children in the marketplace, oblivious to what is really going on around them (serious commerce), they complain about others not paying attention to playing the game the way they want it played. Can you hear Jesus today saying, “To what can I compare this generation?” Do you hear His same answer?

Are many of this generation missing the bigger picture with this pandemic? Are they oblivious to the dangers and pitfalls in ignoring sound scientific advice? Do they not care? Are they so consumed by the lure of the consumerist world that they really want to get back to that? Aren’t we all leaning a little that way, yearning to return to how things were? So are we to be condemned? No.

In the selected excerpt for today, from Paul's letter to the early church in Rome, the issue at hand is addressed. It is about the struggle with sin that we all have. This is why we are missing the point, missing the mark. And it is not related to just what is currently happening with the pandemic, but it pervades all our problems, struggles and issues in our lives. Can you relate to what Paul says? "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." "For I have a desire to do what is good but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do: no the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing." "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched (person) I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

Who will rescue us from this? The answer is, as Paul says, Jesus. The promise that Jesus holds out to us is as valid today as when it was uttered. "Come unto me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." We understand from the whole passage that Jesus is talking about our emotional and spiritual state, as He says, "...rest for your souls."

Again, Jesus uses a metaphor that would immediately resonate with the people of the time. He speaks of taking His yoke upon them. His audience would have been very familiar with the idea of a yoke, both in the literal and figurative sense. They were very familiar with the device, a collar that was used for animals and humans to harness them about the shoulders to do heavy work and make it easier and more comfortable to manage. Often, a yoke was custom fitted and it was common to yoke two animals together. Quite often a stronger, more experienced animal would be yoked together with a younger animal to train it into the work. But the Jewish people of the time would also have been familiar with the term "the Yoke of the Pharisees" as it applied to the Mosaic Law that the Pharisees had expanded into hundreds of rules and regulations. Jesus was calling them to exchange that cumbersome, heavy, oppressive yoke for His. And His yoke was and is this: to live by the principle He spoke of as recorded in Matthew 22:37-39. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" In verse 40 of the same passage, Jesus reveals the truth to everyone that everything in God's relationship with creation, everything in God's plan revolves around this. Living this way will result in fulfillment of any law or regulation that is based on truth.

Jesus calls us into a relationship with Him. That relationship binds us to God through love. That love is unconditional and accepting. It meets us where we are and as who we are. To God, to Jesus, that is sufficient. But Jesus expects this relationship to be transformational. Not just a dumping of our problems at His feet, but a change in perspective, a change of heart, an unburdening of the soul through the transformational power of love. This discipleship, then, is not taking on more learning, it is more of an unlearning of our past burdens. His burdens are unburdening. His work is a rest. It is a means to transform us into a reflection of the image of God, a way for all creation to know its' Creator, as God originally intended. You may remember this idea from Glen's sermon last week.

This transformation is a process, a journey, in which our focus is not upon ourselves. It is more upward and outward, focusing on God's goodness and love toward us and on our love, compassion, acceptance and understanding of others. We cannot think of ourselves as insufficient or wanting, but focus on God's acceptance of us as sufficient. And we are to see that in others as well and to offer that unconditional love that has been given to us. Jesus tells us that this is still work, it is still a yoke, but it is

easier. The transformation will render us to be Christ-like, "...gentle and humble in heart". When we lift our focus off of our inner struggles of missing the mark, of our sin, and focus on God's love and shift our attention to care of others, those inner struggles pale.

So what would it be like to live like this? What would it be like to not judge others? What would it be like to love that person who annoys you? Or that person who has harmed you or a love one? Or that estranged relative or friend? Or that homeless person on the street begging for money? How would it affect your response to the people actively protesting racial discrimination? Or those who seem to flagrantly ignore the recommendations and policies in place to curb the pandemic?

I can say that I have seen what this kind of life could be like in the snippets of good news offered in the media about people caring and helping others during this pandemic. I have seen it in the way people of all races are starting to come together peacefully and shine the light on discrimination to hold the authorities accountable for affecting change. Bust most of the evidence I have seen is in the gestures of care within our congregation, in the sharing of notes and phone calls and messages and cards. All have been glimpses of God's work of love within us. It is a labour of love.

My prayer is that we all continue to take Jesus' yoke upon us and that, strengthened by the Holy Spirit, we may continue to do His work and find rest for our weary souls.

Amen.