

Bearing Burdens, Sharing Yokes

There are days when I feel like a beast of burden. I go from house to car to church and back loaded down with my purse, my computer bag, an additional heavy bag filled with reference books, my lunch bag, my coffee cup, my water bottle. Sometimes it takes two trips to move from one place to another. Of course, it's better now that I'm only working at one church. When I was at two churches, there was always an additional load. Thank God I have a strong back and strong legs so I can carry all that!

Those physical burdens, heavy though they are, aren't as heavy as some of the other things I carry with me daily. I know some of you carry burdens even heavier than mine with you: the to-do list that never seems to end, the responsibilities for parents or for children that require constant care and attention, the worries about health and finances. Add to that the weight of grief for loved ones lost, the burden of guilt for things great and small you can't forgive yourself for, the load of relationships that need attention. Sometimes those burdens seem like more than we can bear and our spirits as well as our legs want to give out under the load.

Jesus isn't much help these days with the physical loads we carry. You don't see him showing up with a wagon too often. But he does help with those other burdens, especially the ones that weigh down your heart. I think that's what prayer is for – to share those burdens that are too much to carry alone.

When Jesus said those words about carrying burdens, though, it wasn't a heavy book bag or a loaded suitcase that Jesus was offering to help his disciples carry. It wasn't the load of work and worries, sins and sadness that we carry around with us either. There was a very specific load Jesus had in mind. Let me put this saying in context. In the previous chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus had sent his disciples out on their first mission to preach and heal and tell about the kingdom of God. As he sent them, he told them how hard it would be and how much opposition they would face, some of it from members of their own families. As chapter 11 begins, Jesus met some disciples sent from John the

Baptist who was in prison, asking him if he was the Messiah or if they should look for someone else. Prison, divisions, hardships, all part and parcel of being a disciple of Jesus and doing his work. So the help he offers is particularly for those who want to be his disciples, who want to share his work. It is an offer of shared help in a job, in God's job for us, not just an offer of rest. We know that because of the image he uses – the image of a yoke.

Now, most of us here don't use a yoke for everyday work. Even those of us who grew up on or near a farm don't have much experience with them. But if you go out to the colonial plantation at Ridley Creek, you can see a yoke being put to use. A yoke is what you use to connect an animal, often an ox, to a wagon or a plow. Most yokes aren't made for one animal, but for two animals working together. Yoked together, they combine their strength and are able to pull a heavier load. So a yoke is something you use to help you work, to make you manage a heavier load than you ordinarily could.

But there's still more to Jesus' image. One way to train a younger, more inexperienced ox is to hook him to a yoke with an older, steadier animal who already knows the tricks of pulling a load. When Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me," that's what he's proposing – learn the tricks of the being-a-disciple trade from the master, Jesus himself. Learn by letting him share the load with you and in the process letting him show you how to do the kind of work God has for you to do.

Jan Richardson tells the story of a young man in her husband's church who, because of a mental handicap, is sometimes hard to understand. But in a message he delivered at a new pastor's installation, he found a way to cut right to the chase when he said the new pastor had taught him that God wants us to make things easier on ourselves and not harder. That's so beautifully simple, but we tend to complicate it and make discipleship harder than it should be.

Richardson goes on to say, " I have to say that it's long been a challenge for me to buy the notion that Jesus' yoke is easy and his burden light. I've seen a lot of evidence that suggests the contrary. But I wonder if much of the difficulty, heaviness, and exhaustion that we experience in

ourselves and that we witness in others comes because we are making our own darn way—and making it difficult—rather than tending our connection with the one who wants to make the way for us and to work alongside us. I wonder if perhaps what Christ meant is not that walking with him is uncomplicated but rather that when we focus on our relationship with him, the road opens before us with less resistance and less striving on our part.”

Discipleship requires hard work. It takes the labor of spiritual discipline, daily commitment and sometimes just plain hard labor. If you try it alone, you might bend or break under the load. But Jesus doesn't expect you to do it alone. When he sent those first disciples out, he sent them two by two. And here, he offers you a partner in the work who cannot be surpassed – himself.

He gives you the example of his own life, spent in service to God and compassion for others. He shares with you the Spirit of strength and gentleness. He guides you as a yoke-companion shows his partner how to go.

All of this doesn't mean Jesus takes the load from you so you get to sit under a tree and rest while Jesus does it all. This is a partnership, Jesus and you, and one of you can't get the job done without the other pulling their share of the load.

It's hard to reach the balance in that partnership as it is in marriage. My tendency is to either try to do it all myself or to sit back and let my partner do it all. To learn to work together, sharing the load, pulling it equally, keeping in step so that one doesn't rush ahead while the other hangs back and cause both to stumble is the work of a lifetime.

But Jesus is a patient teacher and a reliable yoke-mate. He sticks with you because he believes you are worth teaching. And so bit by bit, step by step together with Jesus you learn the life-work of discipleship. As you reach that balance, you discover that not only the work of discipleship but also life's other burdens become more bearable. In part, that's because you learn the trick of carrying the burden so it doesn't weigh you down, but in part it's also because the burden is shared with the one who loves you best.

This yoke-partnership with Jesus also sets the example for how we are to be with one another, supporting one another, guiding one another, helping to bear each other's burdens. Martin Luther said, "To love is not to wish one another well, but to carry one another's burdens – that is, things that are grievous to us and that we would not willingly bear. Therefore, Christians must have strong shoulders and mighty bones."

Those strong shoulders and mighty bones are built up over a lifetime of spiritual work outs as we face and surmount challenges together, helping each other over the hard spots, encouraging each other along. Then, at the end of the journey, we turn and look back and see how far we've come, how much we've accomplished, and we realize it wasn't as hard as we thought because we had Jesus' help and each other's help all along the way.