

The Yoke That Fits

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Wall Street United Church

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Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30, NRSV

“But to what will I compare this generation? 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 wailed, and you did not mourn.’

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the 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.”

At 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; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All 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.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are 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.”

“Discipleship Dreams”

I wonder how many of us here have faced the pain of being misunderstood or judged. I wonder how many of us have let that stop us from following a dream, or even of truly becoming ourselves, and becoming the disciples God dreams we can be.

Maybe you’ve been judged for being too old or too young, wrong gender, wrong sexuality, too tall, wrong body type, wrong skin colour, wrong clothing, wrong accent, too much hair or not enough! For having a disability, or coming from the wrong country. I can go on. There are a million ways we humans can judge, or be judged, and wound each other. But it doesn’t have to be that way.

Do any of you remember the British singer Susan Boyle? Back in 2009 at age 47 she auditioned on the show *Britain’s Got Talent*. She came out looking for all the world like a stereotypical 50’s housewife. The cameras show people rolling their eyes and laughing

at her when she first comes out. She's slightly overweight, her hair is unstyled, and her dress is from a previous era. She was judged before she even began to sing. And she had let those judgements stop her in the past. She had been bullied in school. But she loved singing! She had taken voice lessons and sang in a church choir, but she had never sung in front of a national audience. Too afraid. Too sure the people who put her down were right. Too keen to just slide by unnoticed. But she decided finally, on this day, that nobody was going to stop her.

She came second. Later she went on to produce the most loved and highest earning CD by a female artist in the history of Britain up to that point! The song she sang at that audition was "*I Dreamed a dream*" from *Les Miserables*.

Now Susan was and is a Christian. I wonder, when she was bullied, if she took comfort from the fact that Jesus was judged too, and so was John the Baptist. I wonder if the richness of their lives helped her pursue her dream. I wonder if the yoke of Jesus' love freed her in the end and helped her find rest.

Setting the stage

So let's look at that Gospel passage. John the Baptist and Jesus are related, but they are very different.

John takes keeping it simple to the extreme. He lives in the wilderness, wearing animal skins, and eating only the food he can glean. His roof is the sky and his artwork is the sun glinting off the Jordan river. He makes a life of pointing beyond himself and this world to God, and to Jesus, the Messiah.

That is *his* dream of discipleship and of life. He loves the wilderness, and he lets people come to him by the shores of the Jordan River. He spends his time baptizing people, calling them to return to God, and, like Jesus, speaking truth to power. He speaks out about injustice.

Jesus doesn't live in the wilderness. He spends time in it for sure, but most of the time he's moving from town to town. He socializes, and lingers over sit-down meals with people. He draws out their hospitality. And he does so with the people who are *most* judged and most outcast.

John fasts. Jesus eats.

Two very different approaches to living the Gospel. Two very different ways of living God's dream!

And both, as we heard in today's Gospel, judged as wrong by the religious leaders of their day. They accuse John of being possessed by a Demon. They accuse Jesus of being a glutton and a drunkard.

Things have gotten so bad for John the Baptist at this point that by the time of the reading we hear today, he is actually in prison. Calling out truth to power is risky business.

Being yourself is too. But he's not alone. And I hope you're not either.

John's followers and friends have still been coming to him in prison. And John, whose whole life is about pointing people beyond himself to Jesus the Messiah, has in fact just prior to today's passage instructed his friends to find Jesus and ask him — *"Are you the one we've been waiting for?"* John already knows the answer is yes.

They do find him. Jesus answers by describing his works and echoing Isaiah's vision of God's kingdom. Then he praises John and says: *"among those born of women, there is no one greater than John the Baptist."* (Matt 11:11)

Which is amazing, right? Because John the Baptist is now a convict, accused of being possessed, and — sorry to give it away — will shortly be executed. But Jesus stands by him anyway.

Jesus always stands by the outcast. In fact, Jesus *becomes* the outcast, being true to himself and to God regardless of the judgement of the world.

The Discipleship Call

Which doesn't mean he's not exasperated.

Part of his frustration may be because, while judgment will **not** stop Jesus or John, Jesus knows that judgement might stop most of us. Jesus knows we are vulnerable. And if we are afraid, we may never live up to the dream God has for us, to be the disciples we are called to be, each in our own way. To be freed to be who we are.

So Jesus reassures his followers that his *"yoke is easy."*

The Yoke of Jesus

Let's hear that beautiful ending passage again before I go on. Jesus says:

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 reference to the yoke is actually very intentional, even though it sounds poetic. The rabbis and religious teachers of Jesus' time referred to the teachings of the Torah as a *"yoke"*. (Not an egg yoke — I just mention that for those of you still digesting breakfast!) but the yoke that cattle might wear to pull a wagon.

The yoke that the religious teachers of Jesus' time were referring to consisted of the 613 laws that we find in the Torah. These laws governed everything from religious worship

to what a person might wear, who they might touch, how they might eat, and all the little things of daily life. It was well-intentioned and meaningful: but that yoke could be heavy.

Which brings us to Jesus' statement: *"My yoke is easy."* He means God's. He has just clarified that he is indeed the anointed one, the Messiah.

And hear him say it again: *"My yoke is easy."* The word "easy" in this context is a translation of the ancient Greek word *"chrestos"* which actually was more commonly used to mean 'useful' or 'suitable'.

In other words, Jesus was saying *'My yoke is meant to fit you, in all your uniqueness, in all the ways you are different than others, in all the ways you live out your discipleship dreams.'*

The Rules

Jesus isn't teaching something new either. He's still pointing to the heart of the Torah. He's still honouring it.

Remember Deuteronomy? *"God loves the stranger... You shall also love the stranger."* (Dt 10:19) You know, the one who is strange! The one we judge. The one our society sometimes excludes because of systematic injustice like racism, sexism, ableism, or the one excluded because they just aren't like us.

Even in our time, churches have to be careful not to treat faith as a system of conformity: wear the right things, eat the right things, stand and sit when you're supposed to, associate with the right people.

That's not what it's about — as you all well know! It's not about conformity of practice. It's about spreading a pervasive and life-giving love. And it's important to think about what practices build up your faith. Maybe prayer, meditation, scripture reading, a walk in the woods, even fasting.

If those practices bring someone joy and meaning, wonderful! The problem comes when we insist that everyone must follow God in exactly the same way, and we start to establish varieties of rules that result not in greater belonging, but in identifying those who we think don't have a place.

Jesus' teaching

Jesus does give us direction in this. His instructions for discipleship are simple though: *"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." "Judge not." "Love God and love your neighbour as yourself".*

Jesus also teaches that you're not condemned for being you. We are each celebrated. We are loved beyond measure — regardless of the ways we may mess things up because God loves the stranger.

Without strict rules, we have space for deep discernment about what is good and true and compassionate in the world. We *are* called to do that. We try to avoid mistakes. I'm saying that through it all, God will walk with us and call to us, and invite each of us to live out our own discipleship dreams.

Discipleship Dreaming

As St Paul says in his First Letter to the Corinthians: *"⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, ⁵ and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone."*

It's like a soccer team, if you've been watching FIFA! Nobody is putting down the goalkeeper for not being a striker. It's not about becoming famous either. It's about a life of meaning and a sense of peace that comes from following your path.

The yoke of Christ is also not a demand that every disciple do every possible good thing. Sometimes saying *no* is not selfish; it's just the opposite. It is faithful. It's following God's call for you. There is no one person who could do all the ministries in this church. We aren't meant to.

So what is your discipleship dream? What gives your life meaning? What moves you? What troubles you? What brings you joy? What stands in your way? What suits you? What might you need to change? Maybe you're already following that dream and your soul feels at rest. Or maybe you're at a fork in the road.

Becoming a minister is part of my discipleship dream. There have been different challenges along the way for sure, but does it ever bring me joy. Do I ever feel blessed! Do I ever feel God's presence when I am with you.

But can you imagine if, as a little Catholic girl, I had ever articulated, *"I want to grow up and preach on Sundays"*? What a weirdo! What a stranger!

But God loves the stranger.

And doing the things we feel called to do brings us rest. Being the person we are called to be brings us peace, at every stage of life. And it all brings joy and love to the world.

Learning from Christ

Don't worry, you don't have to have it all figured out all the time. Our journey is lifelong. The road shifts and turns. And our journey involves a commitment to seeking wisdom —something else Jesus' mentions in today's passage — all along the way.

Jesus doesn't *just* say "Take my yoke," he also says *"Learn from me."*

It implies something ongoing.

Learning to love others is hard. People can be difficult. And learning to love ourselves? Oh, that's even worse. That's the big one! We've internalized those rules society puts before us.

But we learn. And we try. And we turn to Jesus to show us the way.
Because discipleship, at its heart, is not about arriving at a place where we have finally figured everything out. Discipleship is not graduation from uncertainty.
It is continually trying to learn how Christ loves, how Christ sees and how Christ resists the pressure to become what others demand he be or that we be.
It is learning how Christ bears suffering without surrendering compassion. It's about finding the place where our gifts belong —not always an easy path, but always a meaningful one.
It's about learning how Christ holds together tenderness and courage, gentleness and conviction, humility and freedom. Learning how Christ prizes love and celebrates the stranger.
“Learn from me,” Jesus says. And so we do.
And while we do, we still listen for Christ's voice, still calling to us, still saying:
Come to me.
Come to me, you who are weary.
Come to me, you who are not sure anymore.
Come to me.
And always, always, my beloved, I will give you rest. Amen.