

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, July 5, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan**

“THE YOKE’S ON YOU”

Scriptures: Genesis 24:34–38, 42–49, 58–67, Psalm 45:10–17
 Romans 7:15–25a Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30

While I have never seen them in action, I have seen a lot of yokes in my travels.

Oxen are still in use on the south shore of Nova Scotia, and there is a running battle between Nova Scotia and New England about which kind of yoke is better: The shoulder yoke in N.S. or the neck yoke used in Maine.

I have also seen various types of yokes on display at Fort William Historical Park in Thunder Bay. Yokes could be single or double - used on oxen, goats, and ponies.

I have seen videos of oxen pulling huge loads at competitions in Eastern Canada and New England.

Yokes are a relatively simple means of controlling animals, but always:

- Yokes mean work

My grandfather was a farmer.

He scratched a living from a thin piece of poor land in the Algoma District near Thessalon, Ontario.

He farmed with horses and had to work in the bush in the wintertime to keep body and soul together.

He was still on the farm, but not actively farming, when I first remember him.

I lived in rural Canada for over 20 years and helped some farmers over that time.

I have always been close to farming, in one way or another.

There was a time when farmers worked from sunrise to sundown.

Now it's possible for farmers to work long after sunset, their tractor lights beaming out across the dark fields.

I look up at office buildings in any city, their lights aglow long after quitting time.

Don't get me wrong: I don't want to go back to the days of wringer washing machines or milking cows by hand, like my grandparents did.

But I also know that something strange has happened in our lifetime.

The technology which has freed our time has also filled our time.

Now we can send an e-mail message at one in the morning or receive a text at midnight.

City folks used to walk to lunch, looking around at the crowds or the sky; now people walk to lunch talking on their cell phones.

What does a lunch break mean if you're doing business while you're walking?

Perhaps all these advances mean more time with friends and family, more time stopping to smell the roses.

Or perhaps we can spend even more time doing even more work, like chickens in cages.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens", said Jesus, "and I will give you rest".

Your burdens may be no heavier than a cell phone, your physical labour no more demanding than pushing the buttons on your washing machine, but you know what it is to long for rest.

Or you may have no work at all, laid off after twenty-five years with the same company or trying to find your first job after college, or university.

Your days are not filled with work, but neither are they graced with rest.

What Jesus means by rest is more than sleep.

It is more than a break in activity.

This is the rest St. Augustine meant when he said, *"O God, our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee".*

But our days are often filled with frantic seeking; we remain restless even when we manage to take time off.

These past few years have been marked by expansive economic growth in our country, and even with the roller coaster ride in the COVID-era stock markets, there is still prosperity there, but one can feel the restlessness under the market reports.

Over 15 years ago, I was at a conference in Mississauga, and we were driving somewhere, and we were stopped at an intersection.

Off to my right was a new housing development, with a huge sign offering condominiums for "less than \$600,000" like that was a tremendous bargain!

Who can afford such housing? I asked to no one but myself.

Those homes are probably selling - quickly - for well over \$1.5 million now.

Maybe such prices seem far-fetched, but such extravagant excess affects all of us.

People who feel they've made it when their salaries reach six figures begin to meet more and more people who have far more than they do.

\$100,000 begins to seem small - compared with a quarter of a million.

You probably have heard of the "Sunshine List" – the annual record of public employees who make more than \$100K per year.

I have thought in recent years, that the threshold should be raised – lots of public employees make that kind of money now.

There's no end to this search for satisfaction: the more you earn - the more you imagine you could earn.

I suppose that economist would tell us that our restlessness keeps the economy going.

But it doesn't give rest to our souls.

The Rev. Dr. Barbara K. Lundblad

Some people dare to admit their own longing for a different kind of life.

Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra introduce us to someone with this longing in the introduction to the book **Practicing Our Faith:**

"I never thought I'd be living this way," she says. "Somehow I imagined that life would be simpler."

She has reached forty, and she thinks she should have her life together by now, but things just are not right.

Too few evenings include nourishing suppers shared with loved ones; too many are given over to the demands of paid work or housework or lost to worry and exhaustion.

Her closest friends are spread across several time zones.

The old neighbors she entrusted with the house key are gone, and she barely knows the new ones.

She finds community here and there, and volunteers to help out when she can, but she is wary about getting too involved.

Showing up at a school meeting, she has learned, probably means getting stuck with a fund-raising assignment, so increasingly she stays away....

"This is not how I intended to live my life," she sighs, as she turns to another task.

It seems to me that the answer is not just more time off (though that might be a beginning!)

There is more to Jesus' promise of rest than taking a break: *"Take my yoke upon you."*

This image doesn't fit with rest.

We seldom use the word yoke anymore but, as I said earlier, our memories bring to mind teams of oxen or horses, joined together under heavy wooden yokes, pulling plows or wagons.

Or

you might see a wooden yoke on a person's shoulders, loaded with heavy buckets of water balancing on each pole.

How can we find rest by taking up a yoke?

Jesus borrows this image from the wisdom writings, writings we probably know best from the book of **Proverbs**, but also found in less familiar books such as the **Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach**.

In these writings **Wisdom** is often pictured as a woman,

- calling people in the streets, teaching them,
- inviting people to take her yoke upon them - and learn.

The yoke she offers is not a burden but a source of life and joy.

Listen to one of these readings. (**Sirach 4:11-12**)

"Wisdom teaches her children and gives help to those who seek her.

Whoever loves her loves life, and those who seek her from early morning are filled with joy."

Those who seek her from early morning are filled with joy.

We might say, they have found genuine rest

- rest which is **something** rather than **nothing**.

Jesus said:

"Come to me, all you who that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

The Rev. Barbara Cawthorne Crafton

But there is nobody who will not one day find himself bearing a load too heavy to carry alone.

None of us are self-sufficient, however strong, or weak or rich or poor we may be.

We are all in need of comfort, in need of refreshment.

Blessed are those who know their need of it early;

they are the ones who will put themselves in the way of the Comforter.

IN THE NAME OF GOD, THE CREATOR, CHRIST OUR SAVIOUR, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT OUR
SUSTAINER. AMEN

Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30 - comments

"We all *need* to wear the yoke of Jesus.
We all *need* to wear the religion of Jesus.
Love of God. Love of neighbor. Mercy, love, and kindness.
A faith that moves mountains and carries momentous burdens."

"It is not that Jesus invites us to a life of ease. Following him will be full of risks and challenges, as he has made abundantly clear. He calls us to a life of humble service, but it is a life of freedom and joy instead of slavery."

Stewardship Thought *Sue Bender, author*

Gratitude makes every day sacred.
Expressing our gratitude is a gift to the giver.
Gratitude for small things makes every day a gift.

APPROACH

Merciful God, we gather together to offer You our praise and thanksgiving
for the unfailing love You have shown toward us, generation after generation,
and for the compassion You shower upon us, day after day.
You alone are our God. We are Your people.
We pray that Your Holy Spirit would move among us as we worship.
Open our hearts and our minds to see You at work among us, encouraging, challenging, uplifting, and
inspiring, as each one has need.
May our worship bring honour and glory to You.

God, we confess that we don't always understand our own actions.
We clearly know what is right - what you expect of us - but we don't always do it.
We also clearly know what is wrong—the thoughts and actions that hurt others and offend you—but we
do these things anyway.
Forgive us!
Through Jesus Christ our Lord, set us free from the sin that controls us. AMEN

Words of Assurance (based on Psalm 145:8, 14)

People of God, know this:
Our God is merciful and compassionate,
slow to get angry, and filled with unfailing love.
When we stumble, he is there to catch us;
when we are weighed down, he is there to lift us up.
So be at peace: your sins are forgiven.

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

God of mystery and meaning, help us to discover your purpose for our lives.
Free us from the limits set by past expectation and experience
and keep us open to all possibilities.
Bless those who extend the boundaries of love and respect,
who show kindness to strangers and forgiveness to people who hurt them.
Work among us by your Spirit to heal the invisible wounds of the heart:
Lord, in your mercy...**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who suffer from the influence of anger, jealousy, resentment, or bitterness, their own or
from others. Work among us by your Spirit to create mutual respect and good relations.

Lord, in your mercy...**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for your wisdom to inspire politicians, judges, lawyers, and all who form and keep our laws. Work among us by your Spirit to recognize injustice and respond to create systems of fairness and trust.

Lord, in your mercy...**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for your healing for those who are ill or in chronic pain, for those grieving the many losses of the pandemic, and for all who feel afraid for the future. Work among us by your Spirit to renew hope and sustain our support for each other.

Lord, in your mercy...**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for those whose workplaces are recovering from the lockdowns and economic shock during the pandemic. Give courage to those who have lost so much, and creativity to those reorganizing their lives. Work among us by your Spirit to rebuild common life with an eye to the most vulnerable.

Lord, in your mercy...**Hear our prayer.**

And now we offer you prayers for the people on our hearts today :

Our loved ones – family, friends,

Those who are most in need of a home, or food, or water

Those who are suffering because of the shade of their skin

To you, Source of each life and all life, we bring our prayers, uniting in the words Jesus taught us:

The Lord's Prayer

SENDING OUT

Sisters and brothers of Jesus,
I do not have a clue as to the personal hard decisions,
heavy responsibilities, or heartaches
that some of you might face today

But one thing I do know, which is forever certain:
You will not have to face any trial on your own.
Bidden or unbidden, recognized or unrecognized,
God will be with there with you all the way.
This I can promise you, and with this promise
I bless you!

The love of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the power of the Holy Spirit,
will
be with you always.

Amen.