"Come. Rest. Learn. Take my yoke upon you."
Sept. 1, 2013
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This is the last message in our "Come. Rest. Learn." series. (Pick up basket.) We heard from Neil on August 10 to "come, lay it down." The invitation was for us to name what it is that keeps us in the "state of weariness," that weighs us down, that keeps us exhausted. We were invited to lay down our burdens when we came for communion. (Hold basket.) And many of us did.

"Come unto me all you who are burdened."

(Sit on the bench with a sack of potatoes on the comforter.) Karla invited us to rest—not just physical rest, but rest for our souls. And at the end of her sermon she asked the very important question, "Where are your potatoes?" (If you don't know the context of that question, I advise you to check out the DVD or CD and listen. It will be very worthwhile.)

"I will give you rest."

Neil encouraged us to learn of Jesus, to follow Jesus, learning by example, not just by words. "Take up your cross and follow."

"Learn of me for I am gentle and humble in heart."

I rather like this progression. We responded to coming and laying it down. … We were promised rest. … And we have the invitation to learn from the greatest Teacher, who is gentle and humble in heart. … Really, what's not to like? Who of us doesn't want to let go of burdens? Who of us doesn't enjoy rest? And who of us wouldn't want a teacher who is gentle and gracious and humble in his very being?

But then Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you." My guess is that Jesus knew he would get people's attention by inviting them to take on a yoke. This was a common scene in his time. Oxen yoked together, working the fields, and working hard. It was not a symbol of rest. Furthermore, the people also understood the yoke of the Pharisees, which demanded strict obedience to the law and was rigid and unbending. I wonder if a few in the crowd thought to themselves, "Jesus, you just lost me. I let go of my burden, I claimed your rest, and now when I'm just settling in. You who claim to be gentle and gracious, you want to put the yoke back on me?" And then Jesus claims that ***his*** yoke is easy and the burden that ***he*** gives is light. How can this be?

What brought on this invitation by Jesus to come, lay it down, and take his yoke?

The beginning of Matthew 11 has Jesus with his disciples, finishing up instructing them. He then goes out to the towns of Galilee to preach. At some point John the Baptist, who was in prison, sends several of his disciples to inquire of Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Now let me use my imagination. Jesus' jaw must have dropped. He must have looked long and hard at these men, for they came representing the same man who prepared the way for ***his*** ministry. This is the same one who had baptized him, the same man who heard and saw Jesus preach, heal, and teach. I know this isn't in the script, but Jesus must have scratched his head or pulled on his beard, and said, "Really? Is this really John's question?" Or as my grandchildren say, "Seriously?" Was John challenging the integrity and authenticity of Jesus? If you let yourself, you can identify with Jesus' pain. We have all been there.

And then, in true Jesus fashion, he didn't just say, "Yes, I am." Instead, he said, "Go back and tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, leprosy is cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached." Look at the evidence; talk about what you have seen.

I think Jesus was annoyed or maybe even angry. I hope we are okay with a Jesus who had emotions.

I believe Jesus models for us how to name our anger, work through it, and come back to God.

Jesus first of all affirms John the Baptist and reaffirms that he prepared the way for Jesus (a good thing for us to remember when we are angry with someone).

He continues to talk to the crowd and asks, "What is it you need to see in order to believe?" He compares them to children in the marketplace who didn't cooperate. He reminds them that when John came to them neither eating nor drinking, they said he had a demon. Now Jesus came, and he ate and drank with them, and they called him a glutton and a drunkard! You couldn't win with these folks.

Then Jesus continues his lecture and denounces the cities where he had done miracles, and yet they did not believe. Jesus suggests that Sodom would be better off than these cities. Ouch! This seems rather harsh, don't ya think? How might feel it if Neil went on a rant about not hearing him and believing and declared Las Vegas better off than Goshen?

There must have been a long pause here.

And then Jesus begins to pray. Many of us know the routine of anger, frustration, and defeat coming to a head, and we pour out all that is within. We get it out there, and then, after naming it, we can in some fashion let it go. Jesus was one of us. He knew disappointment in people, even those close to him, but he also knew he was not in this alone, and so he prayed. A good example for us.

And then he ends his prayer with, "Come to me. Come close." I think he invited those in his audience to lay down their burdens as he was laying them down. He was giving them the picture of one who came to his Father, his Parent, and he also was laying down his burden.

"Come to me. Rest. Lay it down. Learn of me. Follow my example. I am gentle and humble." Not weak, but gentle and humble. A fierce gentleness that can tell the truth and then let it go.

Jesus invites his audience and he invites us to get into the yoke with him. He is not asking us to go it alone. We are to join him in this yoke, and when we join him in this yoke we can be assured that it fits us.

So what does it mean to be yoked with Christ? Is it a little like the story I read about a farmer who was out plowing his field with a team of oxen? The one ox was a little bigger than the other, and a neighbor inquired about this fact. The farmer replied that the bigger one was older and was the best ox he had ever had, so he put them together so the younger, more inexperienced one would learn from the best how to plow. Maybe it is a little crass to compare Jesus to the bigger ox, but you get the picture, Jesus is the Leader, and as we walk beside him, working the same field, going the same direction, we will be made more and more into the his image.

Legend has it that Jesus was a master yoke-maker. In those quiet years before his public ministry began, farmers came from miles around to buy a hand carved yoke. The farmer would first bring

his oxen to the Carpenter, who spent time measuring the team, the height, the width, the space between them, the size of their shoulders. Within a week the team was brought back and fitted with this hand crafted yoke, made especially for them. Now Jesus would look for the rough places, smoothing them out and fitting the yoke perfectly for this particular team of oxen.

Could it be that Jesus was remembering his former craft? It is so like Jesus to use the everyday object lesson. This is the yoke that Jesus invites us to take. One that is fitted for us, not easy as in "no problem," but tailor made, well fitted for us, one that brings rest in its wearing, because it was made for us.

When Jesus invites us to be in the yoke with him, we can be assured that we are paired with the best. It means that however hard the ground, however difficult the mission, however hurtful the words, we are not alone—we have one who is strong and will stay close.

I think Jesus understood the heavy burdens that the people were carrying. He knew of the laws that had indeed burdened them down. In Matthew 23:4 Jesus refers to the heavy burdens that the religion of the Pharisees and teachers of the law were imposing on the people. He knew that they could not keep all 600 laws, or even remember them all. Jesus invites the people to join him in his yoke, one that was radically different from what the religion of laws had given them.

This religion kept them focused on themselves, with the question, "Am I doing this right? How should this be done?" and the sure realization that they were never good enough, because the law condemned them.

Jesus says, "Learn from me." Watch me, draw close, practice what you see me do. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind and your neighbor as yourself." "Love one another." The story of the prodigal son comes to mind, where the rules and laws of the older brother were tossed to the wind and the father's love prevailed. The father waits longingly; he spends long anxious moments gazing across the countryside waiting for his son, the one he longs to hold close to himself, the one he longs to have a relationship with again. This is the yoke Jesus invites us into.

We see Jesus in the gospels as he taught the people, as he fed them, as he healed them. We see his compassion as he forgave them, as he laid his hands on them, as he blessed them. Even if we wouldn't have Jesus' words, just watching him would have told us who he was. Yes, his actions said clearly, "I am gentle and humble in heart."

When Jesus invites us into the yoke with him, he is saying, "Make my ways your ways. Get next to me. Love as I love—with all your heart, with all of your being." It demands our all, and it doesn't come easy. As Richard Foster says, "Not by gritting our teeth, but by falling in love."

That's what we did when we were married. We fell in love, and we hoped that the yoke, while we wouldn't have named it so, we took on gladly (at least I hope we did) was supposed to be easy and a delight. And, yes, we did have those elements, but how many of us looked long and hard at how well-suited we were for each other? We all know the line, "Opposites attract," and we also know the truth that opposites at some point "attack." That is when we fully enter into the yoke or commitment we have made. There is room for only two in this yoke, and, yes, we all know that this yoke is in process.

We here at Waterford are yoked together in some fashion. We have committed our lives to each other in prayer and support. A little later in the service Neil will give all of us time to share our joys and concerns, and then we will pray together, thus sharing our burdens with each other. This

reminds me of the phrase in the song, “He ain’t heavy … he’s my brother.” We are together in this journey.

Be assured that being yoked with Jesus does not mean a life of ease, without struggle or stress, without difficulty and trouble. As someone said jokingly, “Jesus invited us to join him in the yoke, not a hammock.” Maybe we rebel against the yoke because we long, even expect, the hammock, a life of ease, a life of entitlement where we sail through life without anxiety and distress. This was not what was promised, and we should never expect it.

Jesus said to come, to rest, to learn. This is our invitation every day. We come daily, we lay down our burdens daily, and we learn, we practice, we work alongside Jesus, the best yoke-fellow.

I want to conclude with the story of one who was deeply yoked to Jesus, who had practiced long and hard to love. The story is one that James Krabill wrote.[1]

> Imagine this scene from a recent courtroom trial in South Africa: A frail black woman stands slowly to her feet. She is something over 70 years of age. Facing her from across the room are several white security police officers, one of whom, Mr. van der Broek, has just been tried and found implicated in the murders of both the woman’s son and her husband some years before.
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> It was indeed Mr. van der Broek, it has now been established, who had come to the woman’s home a number of years back, taken her son, shot him at pointblank range, and then burned the young man’s body on a fire while he and his officers partied nearby.
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> Several years later, van der Broek and his cohorts had returned to take away her husband as well. For many months she heard nothing of his whereabouts. Then, almost two years after her husband’s disappearance, van der Broek came back to fetch the woman herself. How vividly she remembers that evening, going to a place beside a river where she was shown her husband, bound and beaten, but still strong in spirit, lying on a pile of wood. The last words she heard from his lips as the officers poured gasoline over his body and set him aflame were, “Father, forgive them.”
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> And now the woman stands in the courtroom and listens to the confessions offered by Mr. van der Broek. A member of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission turns to her and asks, “So, what do you want? How should justice be done to this man who has so brutally destroyed your family?”
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> “I want three things,” begins the old woman, calmly but confidently. “I want first to be taken to the place where my husband’s body was burned so that I can gather up the dust and give his remains a decent burial.”

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1 Eyewitness source: The Rev. Maake Masango, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church in South Africa as related to Stanley Green (South African), president of Mennonite Board of Missons. Article by James R. Krabill, in *Keep the Faith, Share the Peace,* the newsletter of the Mennonite Church Peace and Justice Committee, Vol. 5 Number 3, June 1999.

> She pauses, then continues. “My husband and son were my only family. I want, secondly, therefore, for Mr. van der Broek to become my son. I would like for him to come twice a month to the ghetto and spend a day with me so that I can pour out on him whatever love I still have remaining within me.”
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> “And, finally,” she says, “I want a third thing. I would like Mr. van der Broek to know that I offer him my forgiveness because Jesus Christ died to forgive. This was also the wish of my husband. And so, I would kindly ask someone to come to my side and lead me across the courtroom so that I can take Mr. van der Broek in my arms, embrace him, and let him know that he is truly forgiven.”
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> As the court assistants come to lead the elderly woman across the room, Mr. van der Broek, overwhelmed by what he has just heard, faints. And as he does, those in the courtroom, friends, family, neighbors—all victims of decades of oppression and injustice—begin to sing, softly but assuredly, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”

There is no question to whom this woman was yoked. Though her life had been difficult and burdensome, she chose to love. She chose to follow the example of Jesus.

May each of us continue to come, to rest, to learn, and to get into the yoke with Jesus.