

Meditation

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The Scriptural text for the meditation this morning is from Matthew 11:25-30:

25: At that time Jesus spoke these words, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and wise and revealing them to the simple;

26: Yes, Father, such was your choice.

27: Everything is entrusted to me by my Father; no one knows the Son but the Father, and no one knows the Father but the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

28: Come to me, all who are weary and whose load is heavy; I will give you rest.

29: Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble hearted; and you will find rest for your souls.

30: For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Good morning, again. I'm Dan Griset and this is the end of a month when we've had a run of lay sermons, and they've been pretty good. For those of you who are connoisseurs of "real" sermons, they will resume next month when our Pastor returns to the pulpit. In the meantime, you have another Sunday with an amateur.

Out of consideration for this amateur status, I've called what I have to say this morning a "meditation", remarks about a few issues that have kept me company recently, things I've worked on in my own quiet times.

A meditation can even be shorter than a professional sermon which, on an August morning, may be good news for some of us.

Some brevity is also likely to spare me the embarrassment of that preacher who, as he greeted the parishioners after his sermon, got a handshake and compliment on the sermon from an outspoken parishioner. She said to the preacher..."good sermon". "Oh, I have to give God the credit", the preacher said. The parishioner replied..."It wasn't that good!"

One thing is for sure, preparing for a Sunday like this helps me appreciate the work our Pastor Chip has to do almost every week.

Aren't we riveted by these words: "*my yoke is easy and my burden is light*"?

We've heard these words in Handel's *Messiah* and in heartfelt spirituals.

"My yoke is easy and my burden is light".

While I've been mindful of this morning's text throughout much of my life, the words seem to take on fresh meaning as we live more, taste of the sweet and sour of life, endure hardships, hit walls, take detours, experience reality and even grace.

As we find fresh meaning with these words it's probably our process of searching deeper into God's handiwork and uncovering our truer selves where God's work shines through.

In my remarks this morning I would like to share a few personal reflections about these riveting words of Jesus with two intentions: first, that each of us in the coming week will be interested in uncovering more of their meaning and, second, that, as we go through next week, each of us might respond in some new way to the invitation Jesus makes to us.

Let me begin with a few reflections from the flow of my life.

I grew up in a very religious family, a "Bible believing", fundamentalist, evangelistic family. I later saw this as my life in a highly literal sub-culture where conformity was important and where those outside that belief system were suspect, if not wrong, and needed salvation.

That well-known hymn said it well. You know the words: "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war...Christ the Royal Master leads against the foe...forward into battle." For a kid, this war stuff was pretty serious stuff. The world wasn't a friendly place. And from everything I could see, I may have been told I was on the winning side, but it still looked to me like I was clearly in the minority. In that world, the Christian I was supposed to be was always vigilant, always on the battlefield. And one thing is for sure: it wasn't easy.

"My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

After high school it was time to leave home and head out on my own, first to college and grad school and then on to career work and marriage and the start of my own family. In all of this I was in full tilt, doing my own thing, aiming for success in a world that needed less warfare and more peace and understanding.

Paul had something to say about this in his letter to the Christians in Philippi: *"all joy be yours. Be known to everyone for your consideration of others...in everything make your requests known to God in prayer...with thanksgiving. Then the peace of God which is beyond all understanding will guard your hearts and your thoughts...and the God of peace will be with you."*

With an upbringing like mine with Christian warriors, I was prepared for the 1960s and 70s. We had the Cold War, the Vietnam War, racial riots, and a War Between the Sexes. If that was the Yin, the Yang came in a nuclear testing ban, peace protests, freedom rides in the Deep South and Woodstock. Bob Dylan came along and told us: "The Times are A Changing". And that was the truth.

I think most of us would agree that most of our habits of thought and action get entrenched in our early and young adult years. That was certainly true for me. My drive for success in business and politics put me in constant contact with competitors and adversaries. Too often the process of marking progress was measured in win-lose terms: winning a new client, winning an election, avoiding a mistake, shifting risk to the other side.

In this kind of environment, I found self-reliance to be one of my most useful assets. In tough situations, survival and self-reliance seem to go hand in hand.

We've all been in challenging moments when everything seems to be on the line. A decision must be made. There isn't time to blink or call Mom or look for an instruction manual. Self-reliance creates stamina and may even give courage a boost.

Self reliance has many benefits, but one of the most important of these is independence. It's wonderful to be independent. We get to make our own choices. We can take on bigger challenges and be more relevant in the world. We don't have to repeat the mistakes of our parents. This sounds like free will, doesn't it! Go big with it and self-reliance could be free will on steroids!

As with most good things, they can go sour. Self-reliance goes sour when the independence it creates leads us into isolation. Isolation not only from others, but even isolation from one's self, from one's own insides.

Have you experienced this disconnectedness? I have too.

When we look at it closely, isolation is a fertile breeding ground for pride and other personal hardships. We experience these hardships as struggles to be right, to take charge, to be in control. What disappears in this spiral of isolation is relationship with all of its challenges and encouragements.

Is it a surprise that our faith is expressed not only as a response to the Spirit of God, but also as our relationship to others in this community of faith? It's simply not possible to thrive as a Christian without relationship.

Five months ago my father left this earth to be with his Lord. He and I had our struggles. He liked to say that we all have sinned and come short of the Glory of God, that we can do nothing without God. I preferred to say we can do something with God. This tension between sin and grace and good and evil and how it expressed itself between us tied me down for a long time. And perhaps it still does in certain ways.

Nevertheless, I came to appreciate my father's conviction about our human limitations, about our shortcomings. Perhaps this comes with time and experience and with a clearer recognition that we can be busy and worried and tied up in knots over very silly things.

Are we yoked to a parenting rat race? Are we yoked to business achievements? Are we yoked to upward social mobility? Are we yoked to our parents' demons? Are we yoked to marital grievance?

How are we doing?

Are we weary from pulling all the non-essentials with the shoulders of our lives? Are the strains of pleasing others and losing your soulful center throwing you off balance?

That's OK.

We can find God and our salvation in these very strains. Once we know the truth about this we can understand and respond to the invitation of Jesus.

“Come to me, all who are weary and whose load is heavy; I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble-hearted; and you will find rest for your souls.”

In this invitation there’s a new path for us. A chance to understand success more deeply. We begin to discover a truer choice. NOT a choice between the weak and faint hearted on one side and the strong and resourceful on the other. NO, the truer choice we discover is more like a choice between a smooth road and a billy goat trail.

I’ve spent a lot of time on that billy goat trail. Sometimes I’ve seen that smooth road from the trail when I’ve been stuck on a rock with nothing to do but look around. Sure, there’s some excitement in the dangers of the trail, but it’s exhausting and so time-consuming that we miss out on so many other beauties of life.

If the smooth road makes for an easier journey, why are so many of us up with the billy goats and in these difficulties? Am I presuming too much to suggest you may be in the billy goat problem, too?

It’s possible to figure this out if we listen to the prayer of Jesus:

“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and wise and revealing them to the simple.”

The billy goat problem is one huge misunderstanding about who we are. We don’t have anything to prove to God. We don’t pile up credits because we sweat and struggle to roll our stones up the hill only to watch them roll down again and again. We don’t have to be the smartest person in the room. That’s a trick that the Imposter plays all the time. The Imposter inflames our ego and teases us with flattering falsehoods. These lies distract us, send us off on interesting detours and, in the end, leave us burdened down with non-essentials.

How did this happen?

We can find what’s true when we pray and patiently seek out the real person God has made each of us to be. We need to forgive ourselves for believing the bogus and chasing our tails. And while we’re at it, we can even forgive the Imposter, the trickster who trades in the lies that divert us from our true purpose.

Forgiveness moves us towards authentic life, in the same way that that Jesus with unbelievable grace forgave his executioners. Forgiveness shows us truth and grace in profound ways.

And so we have this choice to partner with God or play God in some kind of goofy way. God needs us and we need God. Even though God knows us in every way, God accepts us just as we are. Even better, as we see the truth about ourselves we learn what we get when we try to play God: we give ourselves a hard yoke and heavy burdens that won’t quit.

Jesus tells us that it doesn’t have to be that way. We can dump all the junk we carry around and accept the affirmation God has for each one of us just as we are.

With the confidence that we are truly made in God's own image, our lives can be free of charades and blessed by a peace that passes all understanding. This is our pathway to God's offer of an easy yoke and light burden.

Can we hand over our heavy burdens and take what God offers the humble-hearted?

Let us pray.

Great Spirit who seeks us out with love and grace
We give thanks for our struggles for they bring us into your mercy.
We ask for the light that shows us the way of truth.
Give us the wisdom to hear your invitation more clearly.
And may we take your yoke so that our burdens be bearable.
In this we pray as Your Son taught us to pray:

*Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.
Amen*