“My Yoke is Easy and My Burden is Light”

A Sermon by the Rev. Rachel Wildman

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

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Scripture references: Romans 7:15-25; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

When I read our passages for today, I was up in New Hampshire on a very quiet lake, and had been unplugged for a week from most of life. This morning’s readings were a less gentle re-entry into non-vacation life than I had hoped for.

The talk of sin and evil from Paul, and Jesus’ frustration at the fact that nothing seems to please us, had me close my lap-top for a few hours in annoyance…I’ve been ever-annoyed since at the irony of that response…the very petulant child in the market place about whom Jesus was speaking.

But, this is real life—non-vacation life—more abundant at times than any of us would like with sin of all kinds, even that which incarnates evil, and with options for salvation in the midst of that sin that are not our desired balance of risk, effort, and time.

Paul captures very aptly my own, and our collective, experiences of often being unable to do what we really know we should, or even what we really want to—instead, doing something self-destructive, or hurtful to others…acting in our own disinterest, and in the disinterest of those around us.

In this moment, we are faced more poignantly again with the desires so many of us have long had to meaningfully and effectively initiate racial equity, and yet the long history we’ve participated in of failing to marshall the stamina, focus, collaboration, and risk-taking that equity requires.

In our individual lives, those of us with substance abuse issues or eating disorders and those many of us who are workaholics can likely relate to Paul’s frustration.

For me, and perhaps for many of you, life in quarantine has also been filled with experiences that resonate with Paul’s—So many days, I have wanted to settle into this new normal and drink in the extra family time, but have responded instead with a short temper, a lack of energy, or an equally strong need to be alone.

In this real life, though, Jesus not only points out our ambivalence and the way our desire for perfect solutions can lead us to delay in engaging in important work, but also promises that if we take on that work, Jesus’ work, he will provide us rest and renewal.

As some of our regular Compline-goers will have noticed, the end of our Gospel passage today is one of my favorite scripture passages from our Compline service.

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will  
give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;  
for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for   
your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt 11:28-30)

Ease, as used here, is rest--the deep rest of sabbath… it is the kind of refreshment that inspires us and renews us-- for re-commitment to the yoke of Christ—the yoke of active love—and to a burden that is light. Light as used here is meant by Matthew to be an adjective, but in my being shaped by this passage over these weeks of doing Compline together, I have begun to hear it as a noun. Jesus’ burden is the hard work of bringing light to that which has lurked in the dark.

My Yoke is easy and my burden is light. My yoke is Sabbath and my burden is illumination.

Jesus promises us that in taking on one, we also take on the other…In taking on the burden of illuminating the darkness, we also receive the yoke of deep renewal, of wholeness, that bearing light and yoking ourselves to love affects.

We did a fabulous amount of hiking in the White Mountains while we were up in NH. On one particular day, Simon and David hiked alone, challenging themselves to an 8 mile day with considerable elevation. Simon began to really struggle the last mile before the peak. The continuous climbing was getting old, as was thinking that he must be almost there, only to get to a fresh view of the peak, and realize he was not. But he stuck with it, and made it to the top. When he did, the view absolutely stunned him. As he lay on a rock staring up at the sky, shoes off to give rest to his weary feet, he told David that he thought the rigor of the climb probably made him appreciate the view from the peak much more. Rather than swearing off hiking, which he likely did while in that last mile before the peak, Simon’s desire for more time working towards mountain tops was rekindled, and with an even stronger flame.

Simon’s experience of hard work led him to a deeper gratitude, and great enough insight to name that deeper gratitude as a result of the hard work. His experience is an apt metaphor for what I think Jesus is inviting us to in taking on both his easy yoke and his burden of illumination. The work of bearing light includes reflecting love in places of hate and hurt; revealing difficult truths that have been actively kept in dark places; holding hope in the midst of despair; and accepting the new lives that our living the Way of Love invites us to, even when those around us think we’re foolish to do so.

This work of bearing light can be hard work. It can often feel like the last mile before the mountain peak, on tired legs and rocky terrain. But that work, if we persist, can deepen our ability for awe and joy, and for the transforming rest that Sabbath rest is. It can sharpen the view from the peak, and, with our shoes off in God’s arms, allow for both the wholeness of profound gratitude, and the new insights necessary to continue growing in our ability to bear light.

This, I think, is the circle of Christ’s way--the Way of Love—rest not leading to laziness or complaceny, but instead to a greater capacity and hunger for the life-giving work of light….and the work of light, propelling us to wild, renewing, whole-making awe at the light’s divine transformation of the dark. Sabbath preparing us for light-bearing, and light-bearing preparing us to more fully experience Sabbath. Whether we start with light-bearing or with Sabbath, Jesus promises us that we will be supported as we are led into the other.

Understanding this circle of Christ, I hope, will be empowering to us as we face not only our own very real needs for deep, renewing rest, but also our very real needs for truth, justice, and equity relating not only to race, but also to all of the other sin that contributes to or exacerbates racial injustice—climate change, poverty, our broken educational system, mysogeny, health care inaccess, and the list goes on.

Our earth and her inhabitants are crying out for Christ’s light. So, I end this sermon by asking us to think about where we are in this circle. I invite you to find yourself in one of the following 3 questions I’ll pose, and then, before we say the Creed together, to take a few moments in the silence I will leave, to ponder your answer.

Here goes:

Question 1: Are you yearning for Sabbath? If so, what is your plan to rest? What will life in quarantine allow you, and who in your life might have creativity enough to help you devise a strategy to get it?

Question 2: Are you yearning to bear Christ’s light? If so, to where is Jesus calling you?

Question 3: if you are not yet in this circle, at which entry point do you think you will begin? With Sabbath rest…or with light-bearing?

In the presence of God on this 7th Day—God’s own Sabbath Day--let our contemplation begin…and if you feel so moved, I warmly invite you to share the results of that contemplation via the chat function!

\*\*My processing of these passages was shaped by the following resources:

* New Interpreter Bible Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew
* The Rev. Bruce Epperly’s Commentary blog: <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2020/06/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-fifth-sunday-after-pentecost-july-5-2020/>
* The Process and Faith Commentary series: <https://processandfaith.org/lectionary-commentary/the-fifth-sunday-after-pentecost-proper-9-year-a-5-july-2020/>