

## The Upward Way

King of Glory Lutheran Church

Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry

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Year A: Pentecost 6: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

"But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, <sup>17</sup>'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'<sup>18</sup>For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; <sup>19</sup>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."

<sup>25</sup>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; <sup>26</sup>yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>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. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

*The Pharisees write off both John the Baptist and Jesus. People don't like others who point them to a new way of life. That requires change. Change includes risking what we currently know for that which is unknown. Yet, Jesus invites us to learn from him like little children. Trust. Listen. Watch. His yoke, His presence with us changes our very lives from being burdensome to being life-giving.*

Beloved of God, grace and peace to you as we walk with Jesus whose yoke is light. Amen.

True story. A young student lawyer named Perkins, went to death row to visit an inmate. They visited a long time and then suddenly two guards burst in, angry about the length of the visit. The guards put the inmate's shackles and chains back on his ankles, wrists and waist. Protesting, the lawyer said, "Please don't do that. It's my fault we spoke so long." But the prisoner told him not to worry.

The guards began pushing the prisoner back down the hallway. At that moment, he threw his head back and began to sing. "I'm pressing on the upward way, New

heights I'm gaining every day; Still praying as I am onward bound, Lord, plant my feet on higher ground." (Lyrics: Johnson Oatman Jr. Music: Charles Hutchinson Gabriel) ([preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2023/July/lawyers-call-to-work-on-death-row.html](http://preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2023/July/lawyers-call-to-work-on-death-row.html))

"Take my yoke upon you," Jesus says, "and learn from me...my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

A prisoner shackled in chains singing about making gains in life due to his relationship with Jesus.

Shackled in chains of misunderstanding were the Pharisees who judged both John the Baptist and Jesus. Those first verses in our text today can be confusing, so a word of explanation.

In first century Israel, men played flutes at wedding celebrations and women were paid to wail at funerals. Jesus is like those at a wedding, joyously calling people to new life. John the Baptist is like one at a funeral with his call to denounce your old life for a new one in Christ. John had very strict standards for his way of life and people thought he might be demon possessed because of that. Yet Jesus was seen on the other side of that spectrum due to the fact he ate with and enjoyed hanging out with 'sinners'. Hence, Jesus had no standards at all.

For the Pharisees, these were excuses to not take either John or Jesus seriously. People who call others to a new way of life aren't always very well liked. Look at the Old Testament prophets. They are ignored and disliked and judged. In our text, Jesus is saying the religious leaders don't want to change. They don't want the wisdom He or John had to offer. They like their current way of life.

Can it be true for us as well? We say we want to grow and improve, yet what we often want is the status quo. We like the lives we have because they are known. Changing and growing involves encountering the new. Changing and growing involves leaving behind security and safety.

It's why people like you and I don't try for the next higher position at work. It's why we stay in dead end relationships. They may not be great, but they're something. Change involves risk and leaving behind what we know for something different.

Yet Jesus says, “Look, the way you change is to become like a little child. They are the wise ones. Simply trust me. Listen to me. Watch me like a child does, like an infant even, and you’ll become wise.”

We’ve all been around young children who imitate adults. We wonder how they came to know that word or why they hold their hands in a particular way. Then we realize they got it from us! One of my previous colleagues had a music stand in his living room. He came home one day to find his daughter standing behind the music stand on a chair. She was preaching.

“Take my yoke upon me and learn from me.” In Jewish thought, people were to take on the yoke of God’s Law and God’s Kingdom. A ‘yoke’ was a teaching. Therefore, serious students of Judaism were to commit to keeping the teachings of God’s Law (the Torah) and God’s kingdom.

Furthermore, students of a rabbi were taught to bind themselves to a rabbi’s teachings. Like two animals yoked together, a disciple was to yoke themselves to their rabbi and his teachings. They were to memorize every word and imitate his every move.

In other words, Jesus could actually say, “Take my teachings upon you and learn from me....my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Teachings is a definition of yoke. Of course, we think about a yoke – that wooden piece – connecting two oxen as they plow a field. Certainly not everything that you and I get yoked to is easy to endure. The death of a parent or a young person. Getting laid off. Depression. High prices while living on a fixed income. Fear of money running out in retirement.

The yokes we are forced to take on aren’t always easy. So how can Jesus say what He does? How can He say His teachings make our lives easier, better, or more life-giving?

Judy Richardson, King of Glory member, shared with me about God’s grace. This one teaching changed her life. “The time when I realized what grace really was, it was like the sky lit up. No matter what happens, I have God’s grace over me. Life will work out. Maybe not like I want, but it will work out. God’s teachings, especially on grace, make my life easier, especially in the hard times.”

This truth that Judy knows and we all know is absolutely true. God gives us enough grace for each day. What this looks like is enough strength for one day, enough patience for one conversation, enough kindness to endure a challenging word from someone we love. God's gives us the amount of grace we need for each situation. When we begin to learn God will give us just what we need, like a parent with a young infant, then we learn to lean into that knowledge. We grow.

The truth about a life with God is that it involves growth. Forgiveness doesn't mean anything unless we know about repentance and being sorry for what we've done. The cross doesn't mean much unless we know about our own sin. We cannot rejoice in resurrection unless we've felt the pain of death. A life with God involves growth and change!

I think it's true that while God actively pursues us, God also waits for us to come to Him. When we are ready to join Jesus in prayer, in reading our Bibles, in imitating Him, then growth comes. We can fall like an infant into His arms, trusting fully the life He waits to reveal to us.

It takes courage at first. Courage to trust God with our deepest thoughts, fears, hopes and dreams. Then as we come to know that gentleness of God, we grow in the realization that God is for us. God loves us. God desires for us a fullness of life, perhaps we've never been able to even imagine; a yoke of gentleness.

The Pharisees didn't have the courage to embrace Jesus' yoke of wisdom and learn a new life. They remained stagnant in old ways. I'm not blaming them exactly. They were doing what they thought was right. Like a pool of water that has no fresh water entering it, their hearts remained chained to dormant, inactive life.

Not us! We're like the prisoner singing even as his chains clanked down the hallway. We come together each weekend to worship a living God, to hear the Gospel of truth and to grow upwards in faith. Thanks be to the One who is yoked to us – whether we want it or not – in grace, mercy and love. Amen.

It's why you and I keep coming to church week after week to learn and grow and overcome the fear that keeps our lives stagnant.