

July 3, 2011
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Matthew 11:28-30

The Heavy Burdened

Introduction

Our passage this morning once again comes from the gospel of Matthew. Jesus has been hard at work in the Galilee. He has been preaching his message of a radical kingdom – God’s kingdom – a kingdom known not for power and possession but a kingdom marked by self-giving love, forgiveness, mercy, and service.

Crowds of people are gathering, amazed by not only what Jesus is saying but by what he is doing. Jesus has been making the blind to see, the lame to walk, the lepers are being healed, the deaf hear, the dead are being raised and the poor are being given hope.

But even as the crowds gather – the tension is growing. Not everyone is enamored by Jesus – not everyone finds his message liberating and works of power a sign of God’s work among Israel. Some find it threatening. Threatening to their way of thinking and ways of living. Threatening to their positions and to their power.

It is in the midst of this raising tension that Jesus speaks to us today.

Prayer

Scripture

Sermon

This sermon is about ‘caring’. We as a church have committed ourselves to being known internally and externally as a church that cares – that cares not only about – but for others. This is a part of the witness that we have been called to demonstrate – here at church – in our homes – at our places of work – in our neighborhoods – and most specifically where ever we find ourselves.

This sermon is about ‘caring’. It is about remembering that we have been called to care because we are recipients of God’s compassionate care in Jesus Christ – through the power of God’s Spirit.

This sermon is about ‘caring’. But it is not specifically about sending a card or email, or making a telephone call or visit. It is not about offering a ride or sending some money or bringing a meal. It is not about offering a kind word or encouragement or some helpful resource. It is not about a hug, or handshake or even offering a prayer. Not that it might not be about those ‘caring’ ways. – Instead it is about caring – and it is about grace.

What is this sermon about? --- It is about caring and it is about grace. ☺

Defining Grace

What is grace? There is the grace which is a description of movement – effortless – beautiful – movement – ‘they dance gracefully.’ There is the grace that is a description of one’s kindness and hospitality – ‘she was a gracious hostess.’

But the grace I am speaking about is the underserved – unmerited – compassionate – merciful – forgiving – healing – liberating – redeeming – saving – love of God in Jesus.

Grace is not something we earn or deserve – but it is a free gift – a gift that binds our relationship with God in Jesus – a gift that calls us to follow the way of Jesus as disciples – a gift that transforms our life and our living through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Law

In opposition to grace – is the law. It is not that the law is necessarily or always in opposition to grace – in fact the law – like the 10 Commandments – law – like the Great Commandment (to love God and love neighbor) – are really – when properly understood – and properly lived – extensions of grace.

But here – today – when we look at the story of Jesus – when we think about what he has been teaching – and preaching – and most importantly what he has been living – when we think about the tension that has been growing between Jesus and what is mainly the established religious community what we see – is the stark contrast between law and grace.

Yoke

In our reading this morning we hear this word that is somewhat foreign to us. The word is ‘yoke’. Many of us know what a yoke is – it is that which is placed on the neck and the breast of oxen – or horses – or mules – or water buffalo – in order to bind together two or more animals –

in order to help keep them under control. A yoke also provides the means through which the power of those animals is harnessed – so that a plow or wagon – or sled – or some other kind of load might be pulled.

But the word ‘yoke’ had multiple meanings as Jesus speaks it in the first century.

In his dissertation Charles Tyer writes¹ that *“In all its earliest applications ... the yoke was seen as a symbol of control, ownership, or service. Consequently, the yoke became a symbol ... (of) the owner-owned, master-slave, lord-subject relationship.”*

He goes on to say that ‘yoke’ became synonymous with branding – or affixed some type of ownership mark on a person as well as an animal to show to whom they belonged.

In Judaism and early Christianity – the ‘yoke’ became a way of submitting to the sovereignty of God. –

“The wearing of the ‘yoke’ as viewed in the Hebrew Scripture,” Tyer goes on, “was the outward sign of an inward relationship... Hebrew scriptures can thus view the bearing of the yoke of God’s sovereignty as joy, honor, and privilege rather than tragedy, hardship, and sorrow.”

The note at the bottom of my New Oxford Annotated Bible says that in the time of Jesus, “the rabbis spoke of the yoke of the Law.” Which is to say that one’s obedience to the Law – the Law

that had been developed and refined over centuries of debate and discussion – the Law that turned Sabbath keeping from a day where one’s body, mind and spirit could be renewed – to a day of anxiousness – in order that one did not break one of the many laws.

And it is not that Jesus came to abolish the Law – because he did not. It is that Jesus came to infuse the Law with grace – to transform it from a task to be performed – a duty to be done – to an expression of love for God and love for others.

Grace is what Jesus invites his disciples into. Grace is what Jesus invites us into. The grace that liberates – and redeems – the grace that transforms.

Eugene Peterson in his Message, a biblical paraphrase, interprets Jesus’ words this way.

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Caring

Remember what I said this sermon was about? It is about ‘caring’. It is about us remembering the grace strokes of God’s love in Jesus Christ. It is about us who have received – benefited – experienced – the freeing – liberating – gentle touches – of grace – and it is about us then extending that grace to others.

See caring is more than sending a card or note – more than a meal or a helping hand – more than a hug or a handshake – more than an encouraging word or even a prayer – it is extending the same grace that we have experienced to others.

‘Caring’ is about us welcoming all people – because God in Jesus welcomed all people. Remember how the ‘law’ isolated those with leprosy from others – and how Jesus reached out and touched them.

‘Caring’ is about not judging. What is it that we say, ‘People have decided what they think about us in the first 7 minutes of meeting us. Jesus says, ‘Judge not lest we be judged. With the same criteria for judging you use – you also will be judged.’ Grace doesn’t see the sinner or the saint – it doesn’t see the inability or ability – it doesn’t see the failure or success – it sees a person – a human being – made in goodness and in the image of God. It sees a child of God.

‘Caring’ is about forgiving. Forgiveness is what liberates us from what we have been – what we have done. Forgiveness takes away the guilt and shame – and allows relationships to be restored. We experience God’s compassionate care for us in the forgiveness of our sins. And Jesus says to us – as you forgive you will be forgiven.

‘Caring’ is about love. The kind of love that is patient and kind, not envious or boastful or rude. The kind of love that does not insist on its own way – that does not keep track of wrong doings but rejoices in what is right. The kind of love that hopes all things, believes all things, bears all things, endures all things. Isn’t this what Paul says to the church in Corinth?

Where do we find this kind of caring – in Jesus who call us to:

‘Walk with him and work with him – watch how he does it. To learn from him the unforced rhythms of grace. He won’t lay anything heavy or ill fitting on you or me...’

It is this grace that Jesus invites us into today – so that as disciples – we might extend the same grace to those around us.

May we be the kind of church that can move beyond those initial ways of caring – the card, the note, the hug, the handshake, the food, the prayer – may we grow in our ability to move into the deep ways of caring that demonstrate the same caring grace that we have received in Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ Tyer, Charles L., Anchor Bible Dictionary, Volume 6, Yoke, pg. 1026, from his dissertation: The Yoke in Ancient Near Eastern, Hebrew, and New Testament Materials, 1963.