

Christ Church, Georgetown
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, July 9, 2017
The Rev. Elizabeth Keeler

“Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Last week our guest preacher Anne Dale wisely offered that the Bible *speaks in extremes*. I had never heard that exact phrasing before and it's stayed with me, particularly as I began preparing today's sermon. And so this week I suggest that if the Bible speaks in extremes, well, Jesus *speaks in metaphors*. Jesus speaks in metaphors.

Now sometimes these metaphors are spun out as stories or parables but today we have a straightforward, very familiar metaphor to unpack. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Scottish theologian William Barclay told a legend that Jesus, who was a carpenter of course, made the best ox-yokes in all of Galilee and people came to him specifically to buy the finest yokes that his skill could make – the best fitting, the most comfortable, the least likely to chafe or cause irritation or distraction to hard working animals, yokes that would keep industrious beasts productive and on steady course. Yokes that would lead to long days of toil well-accomplished and satisfying to both the cattle wearing the yokes and the workers who drove them.

In today's Gospel Jesus uses the metaphor of a yoke to invite us into deeper relationship with him, and notice he promises that his yoke worn upon our shoulders is *easy*. The word easy in Greek is *chrestos*, which means pleasant or well fitting, the opposite of harsh or biting. In other words, Jesus tells us that his yoke fits. My yolk fits well he says. The life I offer you is not a burden; my way is customized just for you; it rests easy upon your shoulders.

This particular understanding of the yoke metaphor as being easy, or comfortable, or restful can be difficult for many of us. After all, how can Jesus offer rest and ease when he asks so much of us, of our lives? We have been told the Christian way is hard; it involves sacrifice and selflessness, a discipline and rigor that always seems just a bit too difficult, the road too steep, the price too high, too much asked of us.

It is true and important to notice that Jesus never makes the promise that the work of following him will be without challenge; he never guarantees that Christian fields won't be rocky or steep or muddy. No, Jesus never offers freedom from hard work - rather what Jesus offers is freedom from empty, meaningless work. Soul sick exhaustion is the result of futile, empty work - not hard work. Numbing fatigue results from work performed for the wrong motives - not hard work done with purpose and clarity. Work motivated by greed or unhealthy compulsion, work that is performed out of fear or shallowness or dishonesty – now that's burdensome, backbreaking work.

Finally, we must also acknowledge the weariness that comes from having nothing to do or having no work that truly seems to matter.

Jesus promises rest and relief for our weariness and heavy burdens, not the promise of freedom from work. One commentary put it this way: The easy yoke means having

something meaningful to do: a purpose that demands our all and summons forth our best. It means work that is motivated by a passionate desire to see God's Kingdom realized. It means working towards a certain future in which we are loving God and loving our neighbor and following in Jesus footsteps, modeling our actions and efforts on his teachings. *

Brothers and sisters, we are creatures who are made to work all of our lives. In whatever season of life we find ourselves there is work to be done. Parenting well, studying hard, providing for our families, sharing wisdom, offering kindness, supporting the Church, caring for the less-fortunate, visiting the sick and imprisoned, working for justice and peace, praying, offering thanks to God.

The possibilities for Christian work and participation are endless. And that work – the work that yokes us to Jesus Christ will never exhaust us. It is life giving. It is life giving, it is the work we were created to do, it is the work of our lives. Jesus says: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, trust my way and you will find rest for your souls." Amen.

* Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3