

The Yoke's On You: Jesus' Law of Love

Vengan a mí todos ustedes que están cansados de sus trabajos y cargas, y yo los haré descansar. Acepten el yugo que les pongo, y aprendan de mí, que soy paciente y de corazón humilde; así encontrarán descanso. Porque el yugo que les pongo y la carga que les doy a llevar son ligeros.» [Mateo 11:28-30]

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are 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." [Matthew 11:28-30]

Que las palabras de mi boca y la meditación de nuestro corazón sean aceptables ante tus ojos, oh Señor, mi roca y mi salvación. Amén. [Salmos 19:14]

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen. [Psalm 19:14]

What can we make of these words of Jesus? Are they an invitation, instructions, or a challenge? Perhaps, they are all three.

First and foremost, they are an invitation: Jesus bids us: "[c]ome to me." He offers rest to "those who are weary and carrying heavy burdens." But what are we coming to, what is this yoke and what burden does Jesus ask us to bear? These words are also instructions, helping us to discern how Jesus was the fulfillment of the law. How His life among us, and His sacrifice for us upon the cross was the ransom for our redemption, and ushered in a new way for us to relate to one another. But, most of all, these words are a challenge. For while His yoke *is* easy and His burden *is* light, Jesus asks us, as he asked those who listened to Him more than two millennia ago, to abandon a rigid *Pharisee-like* adherence to the Old Testament understanding of the law, in favor of His *law of love*. But this law of love was a *tough-sell* for Jesus 2000 years ago and, judging from what we learn from the media and see in the world around us on a daily basis, this message is still a *tough-sell* today.

Jesus had a tough row to hoe. The law, as revealed in the Old Testament, had been laid down long before Jesus began His public ministry on earth. The Pharisees, scribes and chief priests had made an institution of rigidly defending and enforcing this code. In many respects, their office and authority was based, at least in part, on maintaining this institution. Then, along comes Jesus to upset their apple cart. And just who was this upstart, itinerant preacher anyway? Who was he to put a new spin on the law? They had the law, it had been given to them, and they were bound to enforce it, and were not ready to embrace a change. You see change was as hard to accept then as it is today.

The law as revealed in the Old Testament was simple and unyielding. Deuteronomy, for example, laid out a precise process for resolving disputes – the focus of which seems to be to make sure that wrong-doers receive a fair trial, that punishment is equal to the offense, that evil-doers are removed from the community, and that others are dissuaded

from committing the same offense for fear that the similar retribution be visited upon them.

According to Deuteronomy:

If a malicious witness rises against any man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days; the judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother; so you shall purge the evil from the midst of you. And the rest shall hear, and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity; it shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. [Deuteronomy 19:16-21]

Chapter 21 of Exodus follows the same theme; only the ordinances described here are more elaborate and precise. Again, a formula for God's people designed to promote justice and fair dealing with one's neighbor – a system designed to make sure that no one got anymore or any less than his due. In Chapter 21, Exodus covers a lot of territory, offering a detailed litany concerning the rights of Hebrew slaves, their wives and children. Then we come to the section on *crime and punishment*, portions of which read:

"Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death... "Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death. "Whoever steals a man, ... shall be put to death. "Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death. [This elaborate formula for wrongs and their redress continues. However, skipping to the conclusion of this chapter:] If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. [Exodus 21:12, 15-17, 23-25]

In Leviticus, Chapter 24, the Law, as it is revealed to Moses, presents yet another formula for righting wrongs and resolving disputes:

He who kills a man shall be put to death. He who kills a beast shall make it good, life for life. When a man causes a disfigurement in his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has disfigured a man, he shall be disfigured. [Leviticus 24:17-20]

In Deuteronomy, Exodus, and Leviticus the formula is very basic and very simple: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a life for a life. The common denominator is getting even. This was the law. And, **the law was the law**, simple and basic, perhaps so because, given the depth of understanding at the time, the law, in this form, was an alternative to unbridled private justice. But, as my dad was fond of saying, in a world where we seek an eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth, eventually everyone will be blind

and toothless. But, perhaps a better understanding of the proper context of the law, as it was revealed in Deuteronomy, Exodus and Leviticus, is provided by today's reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians, wherein Paul explains, in effect, that Jesus is the fulfillment of the law.

Essentially, Jesus removes the burden of mere strict adherence to the law as the criteria for receiving God's love and mercy and entering into true fellowship with Him. Jesus' *yoke* is love for God and neighbor. So in Matthew, Jesus, God the Redeemer, brings fulfillment to the law preaching the **law of love**. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus rejects the "*eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*" [Matthew 5:38] notion of *getting even* and challenges us to return love for hate, good for evil, justice for injustice. He tells us to *turn the other cheek*. But Jesus doesn't stop there; he bids us to go the extra mile and to love our neighbor as ourselves – to change the world by our interactions with one another, one neighbor at a time.

When I think about that portion of Matthew that rejected "*eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*" [Matthew 5: 38] justice and bids us, in our dealings with others, to emulate the mercy of the Father who "sends rain on the just and on the unjust," [Matthew 5: 45] it brought to mind a quote from Shakespeare that seemed particularly appropriate.

In Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, Portia's commentary to Shylock on Venetian Law advocates the virtue of mercy as being above the more rigid interpretation of the law. She suggests that mercy is more important than justice and, that in granting mercy, benefit accrues both to the one who bestows it as well as the one on whom it is bestowed. In her take on how Shylock's dispute should be resolved, Portia, robed as a doctor of laws, says:

*The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes...*
[Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Scene I]

This is the yoke Jesus asks us to wear. Nevertheless, even in preaching love for hate, good for evil, justice for injustice and love of neighbor, Jesus still acknowledges the law and what must be done to live a good and moral life. In fact, a good deal of the texts of the four Gospels is devoted to Jesus' preaching on the fulfillment of the law, about what is right and proper conduct and about how transgressions and slights are to be addressed. It is just that Jesus teaches that our response to our neighbors is to be love, and ultimately judgment and vengeance is not to be our province. This law of love was a radical idea. It's what got Jesus in *hot water* with the Pharisees, scribes and chief priest of his day.

It is clear that we are to love our neighbor, but Matthew's Gospel begs the question: who are our neighbors and how are we to demonstrate our love?

In considering this question, I am again reminded of a beautiful clock I saw when Halina and I visited the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works display at Mercer Castle's 2002 Annual Tile Festival in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Among the many splendid craft works of art, was a ceramic clock. This clock caught my eye, in part, because I love antique and unusual clocks. But, apart from the artistic design and workmanship, the message inscribed on the clock is particularly poignant – especially given the fighting, violence, and unrest between and among nations around the globe; the pushback against voices from the likes of good souls like Pope Francis and others promoting justice, tolerance, peace, and forgiveness; and the senseless slaughter of innocent concert-goers in Las Vegas. For me, then and now, the clock's message seems to take on even more importance, in a world where people seem to be resisting Jesus' message "to love our neighbor as ourselves" with every fiber of their being.

In the center of the clock face, inscribed in tile, were the words "***Repair the World.***" And the prescription – as simple and yet as nearly inscrutable as Jesus' own message – marking each of the clock's twelve ordinals, were the words: *Justice, Devotion, Tolerance, Service, Peace, Compassion, Community, Charity, Generosity, Mercy, Respect and Love.* What a wonderful world this would be if the whole world could live by these admonitions.

"Sticks and stones can break our bones," but, despite what many of us were told as children, **words** as well as actions can always hurt us. We are all connected, one to another. And, the notion that what I do has no impact on my neighbor is pure folly. When Jesus ascended into Heaven, he charged us to be good stewards of creation: not only of the environment and of the natural resources that constitute "this fragile earth, our island home," but also of one another. Throughout the ages and in our lifetime there have been many who have sought to repair the world: Mahatma Gandhi, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Albert Schweitzer and Marie Curie, Mother Theresa, the former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and the former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, former South African President Nelson Mandela, the Bishops of our Diocese – Shannon, Susan and Ted, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, and Pope Francis. This list is certainly not complete. But of course, let us not forget our greatest advocate, the Prince of Peace: Jesus Christ.

Governments have sent envoys from one corner of the world to another to negotiate for peace and greater understanding. Ultimately though, repairing the world is not exclusively the work of world bodies, nations, and governments. In the final analysis, the responsibility for repairing the world falls squarely on each one of us. However, while individually, each of us, by our Baptismal Covenant, are called to do this work and, while the task may seem daunting, *the yoke is easy and the burden is light* when we appreciate the power of community and corporate action. In this setting, the worth of our collective effort will exceed the sum of our individual activity.

When I was at a conference in 2002, the speaker commented about how her small staff and those of other similar small organizations in her community, working together, were able to achieve significant accomplishments. To emphasize that point, she shared a

saying attributed to an anonymous author that she keeps by her desk. Quoting, she said that, “[t]eamwork is the fuel that allows common people to achieve uncommon results.”

To take up this yoke upon ourselves, we need not be kings, presidents, prime ministers, ambassadors, or ministers of state. To accomplish this goal, we don’t have to travel the globe. We need not go to the Great Wall of China, the Berlin Wall, or the Wailing Wall. You will recall that when the Berlin Wall finally fell, it was the work of people – ordinary, everyday, common people – who first breached the wall and then caused it to come down. For us, to do this work, we don’t have to go very far at all. It starts in our own backyard. It’s about the power of the result that comes from how we treat our next-door neighbor. The neighbor we pass on the street; the neighbor who visits our church; the neighbor with the nose ring, tattoos and funny hairdo; the old neighbor; the young neighbor; our little infant neighbor; the homeless neighbor; the neighbor who plays his radio a bit too loud in the morning; the neighbor who greets us with a cross word; the neighbor at work, at school, or somewhere else in our daily life that, as the saying goes, *gets on our very last nerve*; the neighbor in the car that cuts us off or takes our parking space; and the neighbor in jail.

From Jesus’ point of view, they are all our neighbors. We are all connected by the Spirit of God that dwells within each of us; even the most notorious among us – as hard as it may be to see. Jesus’ response to the righteous one in Matthew 25 – ⁴⁰“...[t]ruly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” [Matthew 25:40] – confirms our connectedness, our responsibility for one another, and, that as a community, what we do does impact our neighbor.

We are indeed connected. And we are challenged to model Christ in our behavior toward each of our neighbors. Imagine a world where everyone treated his or her neighbor as if he or she was the Lord. Isn’t that what Jesus taught us to do? That’s the challenge and His commandment: to love Him and our neighbors... Are we ready? If so, as we promised in our Baptismal Covenant: *Let us “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving [our] neighbor as [ourselves].”* [BCP p. 305]

Let’s go out there and *Repair the World*.

In His Most Holy Name... Amen.