

“The Yokes On You”
by Rev. Dana Allen Walsh
Hancock United Church of Christ
July 6, 2008

One thing I can't stand is going to a wedding and not seeing people dance. Granted, I'm often one of those people, waiting for the dance floor to get crowded enough so that I can hide within the masses. The DJ spins, and everyone is on the sidelines, waiting for that one song that finally gets them going – typically, “Shout”. It's an easy one, it doesn't take too much skill to jump up and down and yell out “shout” – “a little softer now, a little louder now”. But, when it comes to dancing at weddings, “Shout” notwithstanding, it is hard to find something that will get every generation of guest moving and onto the floor. Each generation has their style of dance and type of music that resonates with them the most – whether it's a waltz, the electric slide, the chicken dance, or the macarena. It is probably no coincidence that the most popular video clip on the website, You Tube is called the Evolution of Dance. It has been viewed over 91 million times. The six-minute video is of a comedian, Jud, dancing to a medley of dozens of different songs from different eras and genres. He twists, he shouts, he pops and locks, he swings, he even moonwalks.. There are no wall-flowers when watching this clip. There is something for everyone .

This mornings' Scripture text begins with a bit of anger and resentment at the wallflowers of Galilea. “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, We played the flute for you and you would not dance, we wailed, and you did not mourn.” The children would not play. They didn't dance; they didn't care. They didn't participate in the typical games of wedding or funeral. They was no twisting and shouting.

Last week, Ellis preached about hospitality. He talked about how Jesus gave simple instructions on how to treat a guest and visitor. That even if you give a cup of cold water to a stranger, you would not lose your reward. Jesus values and emphasizes the importance of welcome and hospitality. Now only sentences later in our Scripture, he is offering a condemnation. Because instead of tasting the cool cup of welcome, Jesus tastes the bitter cup of rejection. Those of us who have ever asked someone to dance and been denied, know that is worst rejection you can face.

Jesus and his disciples have gone out among various cities, teaching and proclaiming his message, healing the sick, and raising the dead, bringing good news to the poor but is met with rejection and indifference.

Discouraged and misunderstood, Jesus says, “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon”, the Son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!” The onlookers in the city reject both John the Baptist and Jesus. Both appear too extreme for their tastes. John the Baptist dressed in camel hair, eating honey and locusts, is too restrictive and

ascetic. Jesus, eating and drinking with the marginalized and outcasts, is a heathen and could never pass as a religious person.

Thomas Long, a preacher and theologian, writes that “every generation wants something good for itself. The problem is the packaging: John and Jesus do not look like saviors...the wrong diet, the wrong music, the wrong companions, the wrong words. ‘This generation’ like all generations, is scanning the screen of history, looking for hope, searching for salvation. But they cannot commit to either John or Jesus...It would not be wise, they think”

In the book of Revelation, Jesus spits the lukewarm water from his mouth, claiming that he would prefer it to be hot or cold but lukewarm is intolerable. Jesus’ criticism of “this generation” is that they cannot make up their minds, they don’t want to dance and they don’t want to cry, they reject the ascetic and the glutton. Nothing frustrates Jesus like indifference and apathy.

For my generation, the Millennials, we often feel we are without a prophet to speak for our need, where is the one who is not lukewarm, who rejects apathy, who makes the hard choices.

We are reminded on this Independence Day weekend, there have been many who have fought and made difficult choices for our nation: Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, FDR, and so many others. It’s hard not to think about those whose impact has changed our world: Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr, Mother Theresa, Dorothy Day, and so many others. But then we can’t help but wonder...who is the Washington of our age? Who will speak to the issues like King did? Who is the next Mother Theresa?

This same cynical, searching message was prevalent in Jesus’ time. Those of comfort, complacency, status, and success did not offer hospitality to Jesus’ radical message of love and change, but rather rejection. In contrast, those who saw and heard Jesus’ message, were the infants, the little ones, the ignorant. The “infants”, as referred to by Matthew, were not actual children but instead those eager to try – those with a child-like hunger to learn more, to hope, to dance, to not be lukewarm. While the complacent and comfortable weighed options, made lists of pros and cons, the infants welcomed Jesus and his good news.

To those who are lowly and often go without, to the exhausted and weary, Jesus spoke words of encouragement:

“Come to me, all you who 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.”

This passage is familiar to most of you. It’s quoted often – etched on stained glass, and sentimentalized in greeting cards. Its imagery helps us all feel some sense of relief from that which constantly weighs on us. We feel God’s call for us to rest and put down some

of those things that we have been carrying for so long. But in the first century, this text held a different meaning for those Jesus spoke to.

Jesus is speaking to the infants and the poor who at that time did much of the heavy lifting. Therefore, Jesus could be speaking literally of carrying stones and sticks. Or he could be speaking of the burden of Rome's domination over the land. But most likely, because this passage falls within the gospel of Matthew, Jesus meant the religious burdens. By the time Matthew wrote his gospel, the first Jewish revolt had failed and the Temple was in ruins. The Sadducees were out of business, the Zealots were in full retreat, and the Pharisees were the one's left standing with all the power. This placed Jesus' rogue group of followers on a collision course with the Pharisees¹. It was a struggle within the faith of Judaism – they believed in the same prophets, shared the Torah, and worshipped the same God. The real argument lied in the requirements of faith – what it meant to be a believer and a faithful Jew.

To be an Orthodox Jew during that time meant an endless set of laws. A man lived his life within constant religious regulations and heard the nonstop echo “Thou shalt not.” On the young adult trip, we were searching Deuteronomy to find the 10 commandments, which led us to find other rules given to the Jews during that time. We found rules about all aspects of life – how not to trim the corners of your beard, that you must not ignore your neighbor's sheep if it has gone astray, how not wear a garment of mixed fibers, especially wool and linen. My favorite is from the book of Numbers:

If you suspect your wife is cheating, you shall bring her to a priest, who will mix a potion of barley, water, and dust, which the woman shall drink. If she's cheating, her stomach will swell. (Numbers 5:11-20).

(I think anyone's stomach would swell after that concoction)

There are some others I wished to include, but I found those Biblical rules a little too racy for church this Sunday.

In response, Jesus invites his followers to take his yoke upon their shoulders. He says, “my yoke is easy.” The word easy in Greek is *chrestos*, which means well fitting. According to scholar , William Barclay, in Palestine, ox-yokes were made of wood; the ox was brought and the measurements were taken. The yoke was roughed out, and the ox was brought back to have the yoke tried on. The yoke was carefully adjusted so that it would fit well and not injure the ox.

There is a legend that Jesus made the best ox yokes in all Galilee and that men from all over the country would come to buy the best yokes that skill could make. In those days in Nazareth, it would not be a far stretch that carpenter and local entrepreneur Jesus might have had a sign above his shop door that said “My yokes are easy” as in my yokes fit well.

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. “The Open Yoke” sermon.

So when Jesus says, “My yokes fit well”, he means that the life given to you should not be a burden because your task is made to fit you. God has given to us what fits our needs and abilities exactly. The burden is laid on us in love and it is meant to be carried in love. There is an old rabbinical saying, “my burden has become my song”.

Jesus isn't offering to remove the yoke. Instead, Jesus is giving a yoke that fits well. One that is bearable because we can share that heavy load with one who loves us and one that seeks the best for us. Our burden becomes light only by the love of God, only when understood in light of the cross and resurrection.

So the yokes on you whether you like it or not. But it's not breaking your back. It's bearable. It's not a life of constant rules and regulations, that would be too easy in many ways, instead, it's a life lived in relationship and consultation with God.

Jesus invites us into the paradox of faithful service in love, one in which the insurmountable struggles of our world suddenly become life-giving callings when we dare to take up the yoke and follow. The yoke enables us to take on the burdens of the world, rather than living a life of apathy.

We want a life free of burdens and responsibilities. We hate to think of ourselves dependent on anything. That's one reason we all love the 4th of July. We love celebrating our independence and freedom with hot dogs on the grill and fireworks over the Charles River. But we all know that there is no such thing as true freedom. We are never completely free, all freedom has its costs and responsibilities. And we feel that immensely this year as we celebrate our independence while we may have misgivings about our country – whether it be with torture, war, or a broken economy.

Ted Smith, a pastor and professor, wrote an article in *The Christian Century* about how he as a Christian celebrates the 4th of July, especially as he realizes that he could not opt out of his country, even during times of being dissatisfied. He writes, “I had come to think about my country like I think about my family of origin. They are not perfect but I really can't leave them. Most of the time rebellions against our families are just ritual enactments of old family dramas. We are never more a part of our families than when we think we are leaving. But more than that: I have come to love my family fiercely. They show me the same grace, and then some. I've come to think that the members of my family have been given to me to love, just as I have been given to them. We belong to each other, for better or for worse, by the grace of God. And so I love my country like I love my family - as that which has been given to me to nurture, chastise, wrestle with, care for, raise up, suffer beside, celebrate with, and love. Of course I remember its birthday.”

Our family, our country, and our church are all very similar – in many ways we are yoked to them, we wouldn't know who we are without these communities that uphold us and bring meaning to our lives. We are responsible to our families, our country, and our church and they have responsibilities to us. Jesus never wanted his disciples to follow a

list of rules, instead he wanted them to come and work alongside him. To plow the fields and to reap the good in life. He did not want them to wallflowers or lukewarm. He wanted them to take on the well-fitting yoke and work for radical justice and peace. And when the yoke fits well, we, too, can do the work of the kingdom of God and help carry the load of others in friendship and in love. Amen.