

6th Sunday after Pentecost, July 5, 2026; Year A
Zechariah 9.9-12; Psalm 145.8-14; Romans 7.15-25a; Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30
Pastor Renee Splichal Larson

Grace to you and peace from the One who invites us to come to him, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This first verse of the hymn, “I heard the voice of Jesus say,” names the invitation Jesus extends to all in our Gospel reading:

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Come unto me and rest;
lay down, O weary one, lay down
your head upon my breast."

The uniqueness of the hymn is that there is a response to Jesus’ invitation to come to him and rest.

I came to Jesus as I was,
so weary, worn, and sad;
I found in him a resting-place,
and he has made me glad.” -Horatius Bonar, 1080-1889

“I came to Jesus as I was...” says the hymn writer. Not as I think I should be, as I wish I was, not perfect and doing well, but as I was, the whole of me ... mistakes, regrets, burdens ... weary, worn, and sad. This person responds to Jesus’ invitation and finds a resting place in him and is given joy.

All throughout Scripture there are invitations from God to human beings ... to you and me ... to pray, worship, love, forgive, be merciful, respond, follow, come to the banquet, come to Jesus and find rest. We learn that not everyone responds positively to these gracious invitations from God.

We have a good example of this in our Gospel reading. Jesus likens himself to a flute player who plays a song of joy, one like at a wedding feast, and there are those around him who refuse to dance.

He is called a drunkard and a glutton as he demonstrates and lives out the wide embrace of who is included in the kingdom of God, by eating and hanging out with those who are on the fringes of society. Women and children, people like tax collectors and prostitutes, people with skin diseases and foreigners ... people who are described as “sinners.” Some people refuse to accept that those who are last and lowly, are included in the promises of God.

These seemingly unimportant people are the ones Jesus is referring to in his prayer as “infants,” people who are not so caught up in their own ability to save themselves. They know enough to reach their arms out to Christ, and let him scoop them up into the loving embrace of God, sins and all.

There is something so comforting about Jesus words, “Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest...” Whenever I have read this verse in a hospital room or next to a deathbed, I can see people’s bodies relax as if they give themselves permission to finally rest in the arms of Jesus.

These words of Jesus should have this effect on us. These are words meant for people who are tired and worn out from the burdens of life: from illness, loss, addiction, chronic pain, loneliness, depression, work, heartache, and death. Even children can feel weary; all of us can as we carry the yoke of life.

What Jesus offers first and foremost is himself. He then offers his own yoke and instruction. A yoke is an interesting word for Jesus to use. A yoke is essentially a wooden crosspiece that is fastened over the necks of two animals that are side by side and attached to a plow or cart that they are to pull. The wooden crossbar in the middle of a canoe is also called a yoke. A yoke is used for work, generally really hard work.

So what does Jesus mean when he invites us to take up his yoke that is easy and his burden that is light?

Around 15 years ago, I went on a canoe trip to the boundary waters in Minnesota with my sister and some cousins. My most vivid memory of the trip was the grueling one-mile portage within the first hour of starting. Our packs were at their heaviest and our canoes were aluminum, unbalanced, and over 80 pounds each.

The one-mile portage was one of the most physically demanding things I have ever done. All of us were fairly spread out as we carried our own weight by ourselves. I thought, *Surely, I am carrying the most weight.* I was the first to reach the end of the mile portage. I dropped what I was carrying and went back to see if I could help any of the others. When I saw them, their faces were contorted with effort and beads of sweat ran down their faces. I realized that I was not carrying the heaviest load; everyone was struggling.

We learned from our one-mile exhausting portage, and started to work in pairs to carry the weight of canoes and packs for our remaining land hikes. The work was still hard, but it was made so much easier with two people.

When Jesus describes his yoke as “easy” he means, “I will do the work of life with you, right by your side.” It does not mean a life without suffering.

Easy, as Jesus uses it, has the meaning of being useful and generous, being compassionate, and having a particular purpose. Yes, a yoke is meant for hard work, but because one is connected and fastened to another through the yoke, work is shared and made easier.

To better understand the yoke Jesus offers, it might be helpful for us to think about the yoke we already carry. What things in life are bearing down on your shoulders these days? What keeps you up at night?

Perhaps its worry about something or someone. Perhaps it’s money or making a decision about your future. It could be the hard work of sobriety, or simply the 9-5 that pays the bills. Will it ever rain for the crops; will it rain too much? Will the war escalate? Will social security even be around for me? Will the treatment work?

We all carry a yoke of burdens and it can feel mighty heavy at times, and perhaps there is nothing heavier than the weight of guilt and shame.

The word for "weary" [*kopiao*] generally means "to be engaged in hard work, implying difficulties and trouble." As a result of that hard work, one may be "tired or weary." It also takes on a non-physical, figurative meaning: "to become emotionally fatigued and discouraged," e.g., "to give up, to lose heart" (www.crossmarks.com).

Jesus says to you, “You are forgiven. Let go of guilt and shame. I am right here, and I love you.” Jesus offers us his yoke, instead of the ones we insist on carrying, or the ones that are unjustly placed upon us by others.

This yoke, this work Jesus offers us, is to forgive and be merciful, to not respond to violence with more violence, to speak out when one sees injustice, to give generously, and to work towards the day when no one will go to bed hungry. The yoke/work of Christ is to speak about the grace of God in one’s life, sharing with others that Jesus invites them to come to him when they are weary and carrying heavy burdens, that Jesus is in fact gentle and humble of heart.

These things are hard to do, and yet we are yoked to Christ who is right beside us making the work easier and teaching us as we go. Not only are we yoked to Jesus, but one another in this work, having a whole community of people in which to share the work, to carry the burdens of our lives, understanding that we are never to go through this life alone. Synod literally means, “walking together.”

In life we can be overwhelmed with work we cannot do without God or the help of others. To come to Jesus when you are weary is to pray, “Jesus help me carry this yoke of grief because I cannot carry it myself.” Or, “Jesus, even my bones are weary from the endless stream of tragedy in the news. Help me trust that you are making all things new.”

Under the yoke of Christ, even living with burdens, you can still dance and find rest for your weary body and soul.

“Come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,” Jesus says, “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.” Matt. 11.28-30.