

Taking Up The Yoke

Philippians 3:7-14

Matthew 11:25-30

This morning, we gather to renew our commitment to the covenant we have with God through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.

It was John Wesley who suggested that this should be an annual practice in the Methodist Church and so the "Covenant Service" came into being.

Now, for the service to be meaningful and not just a lot of words we recite, it would be good to remind ourselves of what "being in covenant" with Jesus Christ is all about.

In the story we read in Matthew 11, Jesus uses the picture of a yoke to explain to those who were listening to Him what they needed to do to be in a relationship with God – to be in favor with God.

We must remember that Jesus was speaking to a group of people who had been led to believe that the only way to find favor with God was by being good and the only way to be good was by obeying a set of rules and regulations without question and without fail – this set of rules and regulations was not just the ten commandments – by the time of Jesus it had developed into a set of over 600 rules and regulations and keeping all of them became a heavy burden for the people - they were trying desperately to be good but finding the task impossible and so were weary and driven to despair – and that's why Jesus said to the religious leaders on another occasion – "You place heavy burdens on the people's shoulders, but don't lift a finger to help them."

In the midst of their desperation Jesus offers them the way to God and in His invitation we find what it means to be in covenant with God.

And so, as we prepare ourselves to renew our commitment to this covenant let's have a closer look at Jesus' invitation.

But before we do that let me read it to you again but this time from the Message:

“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.”

In His invitation we are invited to do two things.

The first is "come to Jesus".

The religious leaders of Jesus' day all said "do" – as long as you follow the Law and the traditions you will be saved – they turned the covenant with God into a contract – you do your bit and God will do His.

Jesus comes along and turns their whole view of the covenant on its head – He says to them that being in covenant with God is first and foremost about being in relationship with God.

The very thing that they were hoping for and that seemed so far out of reach was possible – all they had to do was come to Him – all they had to do was trust Him to give them what they so desperately longed for – to be right with God – to be in God’s ‘good books’ as it were.

In a world that tempts us to believe that there are many paths to God, Jesus reminds us that only He is the Way and the Truth and the Life – the only way to satisfy the hunger for God is to come to Jesus.

In a world that tempts us to believe that worth depends on performance, Jesus reminds us that it's not what we do that makes us worth saving but that we are created and loved by God. You don't need to do anything to be in God's 'good books' – you are already in His 'good books' because he loves you.

We can so easily reduce Christianity to a set of rules and regulations and when we don't measure up we live with a constant sense of guilt – this morning Jesus reminds us that in our covenant with God we are invited into a relationship with Him that is not governed by rules and regulations but rather by the grace and mercy and infinite patience of a God who understands our struggle with weakness and our dependence on Him to overcome.

Jesus sets the example for us here – whenever he was troubled or had a difficult decision to make – he didn't go it alone – he went in prayer to his Father who he knew could provide for his every need – and he didn't exhaust all other avenues first and as a last resort went to his Father – going to his Father was always his first port of call.

Friends – the invitation is – as our first port of call – to come to Jesus – because he can meet our every need.

The second thing Jesus calls us to do in His invitation is to "take up His yoke".

Now, in the time of Jesus, to "take a yoke" means to become a disciple and in this way, Jesus says to them that coming to Him is just the beginning – if they truly want a growing relationship with God, they must follow Him as His disciples.

Now, to understand the implications of what Jesus is saying here we need to understand the picture He uses – a yoke is not something many of us have seen in use and so please bear with me as I try to fill in the picture.

A yoke was made of wood, and it was used to harness two animals together so that they could work together effectively – the farmer would take the animals (usually two oxen) to a carpenter who would make the yoke, and it was important that it fit perfectly around the animal's neck so that it didn't injure the animal when it worked.

Legend has it that when Jesus worked as a carpenter in Nazareth, he made yokes and above his workshop to advertise his expertise he had a sign that said "My yokes fit perfectly" and so Jesus uses a picture that His listeners would easily relate to and in this way He explains what it meant to be in a relationship with God.

In this picture we are told what it means to be in covenant with God.

First, we are yoked to Jesus – we must remember – as I've said many times already - that Christianity is in essence a growth process.

As Paul reminds us of this when he said (Philippians 3:12):

"I do not mean that I am already as God wants me to be. I have not yet reached that goal, but I continue trying to reach it and to make it mine. Christ wants me to do that, which is the reason he made me his."

The goal is becoming what God wants us to be and we can only do that if we are yoked to Jesus – if we submit our lives to Jesus – it's a picture of complete surrender and obedience to Jesus Christ – in renewing our covenant with God this is exactly the commitment we will make – "I place my life in your hands – for it to be yours to direct and not mine".

Secondly, the yoke was used to produce effective work - spiritual growth is never an end in itself; we grow to serve.

In China they welcome new believers by saying, "Jesus now has a new pair of eyes to see with, new ears to listen with, new hands to help with, and a new heart to love others with."

Friends, this means that for every Christian, service in and for God's kingdom is not optional – it's not something we do if we can find some spare time or something we add to the end of our schedules – service is the heart of the Christian life.

And again, as we renew our covenant with God we make that commitment – "May my whole life be given in service of your love and salvation, use all that I have and all that I am for your purposes."

Finally, the yoke of Jesus is easy because it fits perfectly.

The word "easy" here means "well-fitted" – in other words, we are capable of doing what God wants us to only if we remain yoked to Jesus.

It's not a promise for an easy life but it is a promise for a life with meaning and purpose.

In Jeremiah 29 God says:

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

We are yoked to Jesus so that we are able to move in his direction and not be distracted – remember the parable of the Sower that Jesus told – the seed that fell amongst the thorns which grew up and choked the plants are those who hear the word, but as they go on their way life's worries, riches and pleasures distract them and they never mature.

Staying yoked to Jesus will prevent that from happening.

As we renew our covenant this morning let's really make the words our own so that our commitment does indeed have a deep impact on our lives.

Friends, there are many things that make us weary – that make us feel burdened – from dealing with the curved balls that life throws at us – to living in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world.

But we can learn to cope by staying yoked to Jesus – by learning how He did it.

So, let's remember that as we are yoked to Jesus, so He gives us rest and we experience a deeper peace because we learn to trust Him more.