



Sermon, June 3, 2018
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

The Path Articulated: Part 1

“Bags, Burdens, and Yokes”

Scripture: Matthew 11:25-30

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.

"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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."

Joke:

The priest of the local Catholic church stopped in at the coffee counter and sat down on a stool. The man next to him said, "Morning, father."

"Good morning."

"New around here, father?"

"Oh, no."

"Which is your church?"

"St. Joseph's, just across the street."

"Now ain't that a coincidence, father?" smiled the man. "St. Joseph's is my own church!"

The priest studied the man and said, "strange... I've been carrying on my duties at St. Joseph's for six years now, and I've not seen you there —"

"Well now, father, I never said I was a fanatic!"

I overheard once that the famous comedian and comedy writer Henny Youngman was having a bad night doing a standup comedy routine at a nightclub. At one point, someone threw an egg which hit him. As he stood there with the egg dripping down his suitcoat he looked out at the audience and without missing a beat quipped, "My name is Henny, and these are the yokes, folks."

Yoke: I'd like to start off this morning by talking about a different kind of yoke. One that can be worn as well, but not necessarily with as much relish. This is the yoke about which Jesus speaks in the scripture passage we read this morning. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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."

Purpose of a yoke.

We tend to think of a yoke in this circumstance as being something we alone have to bear. But let's look more closely. When training up an animal new to pulling a load, you always yoke them together with a more experienced animal. Same with the yoke of Jesus. Jesus is not calling us to take the load on our own, we are being yoked with him. That's why he says, "take my yoke upon you." But what is it we are yoked to? What are we carrying in our wagons?

Our Burdens and baggage.

Sometime in the 70s as a result of a lot of pop psychology, the expression came into currency about all the baggage we carry around. Everyone is of course familiar about going on trips and the luggage we take with us.

Packing to move from Pocatello - all the boxes of stuff - I need more than a couple of oxen and a yoked wagon, I need a whole moving van. Of course, most of it is books. But those books represent an important aspect of who I am and what I do in the world. I just need help transporting them.

That is precisely what yoking is all about. We have all this baggage that represents our lives. And we may be able to pare down and get rid of some of the baggage, but not all of it is negative, and much of it has to do with who we are and what we do in the world. We just need to find a way that helps us move with ease and elegance and grace along our path. Wouldn't it ease our way along life's path if there were someone to share the load, and who might even show us a thing or two about how make the journey?

Jesus says “take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” The Christian path is about learning from Jesus. Jesus shows a Way. He so identifies with being a show-er of the Way that he identifies himself completely with the path – and claims it as his identity: “I am the Way.” The Christian path is walking in this Way that Jesus taught.

But what is this Way?

1. Embracing the Great Story of God’s great love for the world – and embracing the fact that we are a part of that story – we are a part of that world that God loves so much. The root message of the Christian story is that of love. God’s love for this great wide creation, god’s love for us, and the love that can flow out from us to all the world around us.
2. This flow of love out from us is all part of God’s great love for the world, for there is something about the baggage we all carry with us on this journey. Some of that baggage is the pain and the heartache and the trauma and violence that has dogged us along the way. Each one of us carries the wounds and scars from our past, and they can weigh down our journey. Our mistakes can haunt us, the bad choices we have made, and even the choices we make when all we have in front of us are bad choices. We carry this stuff around, and after carrying around this baggage long enough, we begin to say – “I am my baggage. I am these bad choices, this mistake, this abuse, this pain.”
3. Jesus says, “Give me your burden. Your burden is too heavy for you to carry. That baggage you have there is just baggage, it’s not you.” That’s what the love of God is all about. And that’s what loving one another is all about – it is reminding one another that we are not our baggage. It’s about removing the burdens we place upon ourselves and helping others remove the burdens that they have placed upon themselves.
4. And it’s about not placing heavier burdens upon other people than they already have. Far too often the religious life has become a burden of heavy rules and regulations and impossible expectations

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that we try to live up to but never can with the result that we add to our load the burden of guilt or regret or self-recrimination. That is not the Way of Jesus.

5. The burden we carry from Jesus is actually a gift - the gift of knowing that we are loved immensely and immeasurably and unconditionally by God just as we are, for who we are. Period.
6. What we do about all this is we give to God all these other things we carry around with us, the pain, the heartache, the negative messages we received about ourselves growing up, all the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, as Shakespeare puts it – all these things are things that happened to us – but they are *not us*. Jesus says “give them to me. Take my burden – the burden that is really a gift, the gift of knowing that you are loved.”

I close with this story by Elizabeth Silance Ballard:

Ted Stallard undoubtedly qualified as the one of "the least." Turned off by school. Very sloppy in appearance. Expressionless. Unattractive. Even his teacher, Miss Thompson, enjoyed bearing down her red pen – as she placed Xs beside his many wrong answers.

If only she had studied his records more carefully. They read:

1st grade: Ted shows promise with his work and attitude, but (has) poor home situation.

2nd grade: Ted could do better. Mother seriously ill. Receives little help from home.

3rd grade: Ted is good boy but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

4th grade: Ted is very slow, but well-behaved. His father shows no interest whatsoever.

Christmas arrived. The children piled elaborately wrapped gifts on their teacher's desk. Ted brought one too. It was wrapped in brown paper and held together with Scotch Tape. Miss Thompson opened each gift, as the children crowded around to watch. Out of Ted's package fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet, with half of the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume. The children began to snicker. But she silenced them by

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splashing some of the perfume on her wrist, and letting them smell it. She put the bracelet on too.

At day's end, after the other children had left, Ted came by the teacher's desk and said, "Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother. And the bracelet looks real pretty on you. I'm glad you like my presents." He left. Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her and to change her attitude.

The next day, the children were greeted by a reformed teacher – one committed to loving each of them. Especially the slow ones. Especially Ted. Surprisingly – or maybe, not surprisingly, Ted began to show great improvement. He actually caught up with most of the students and even passed a few.

Time came and went. Miss Thompson heard nothing from Ted for a long time. Then, one day, she received this note:

Dear Miss Thompson:

I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating High School second in my class.

Love, Ted

Four years later, another note arrived:

Dear Miss Thompson:

They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it.

Love, Ted

And four years later:

Dear Miss Thompson:

As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year.

Miss Thompson attended that wedding, and sat where Ted's mother would have sat. The compassion she had shown that young man entitled

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her to that privilege. (Quoted by Jon Johnston, *Courage - You Can Stand Strong in the Face of Fear*, 1990, SP Publications, pp. 111-113.)

Love changes us. Love changes others. Love can change our burdened lives into lives filled with the gifts of God. “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.” If you have any heavy burden that you have carried far too long, I invite you to give it to God. Let God show you how your life is not a burden, but a gift. This is the Christian Path, this is the Way of Jesus.