

God Gathers Us for Renewal
Pastor Peter Strommen

MATTHEW 11:25-30 NRSV

²⁵At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

In the rhythm of life, rest matters and so does the health of our soul and spirit. Jesus too invites us to find a deep rest in him - - for the sake of our very souls and for the burdens we carry in our life journey.

(vv. 28-30) "Come to me, you who are weary and heavy laden. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light."

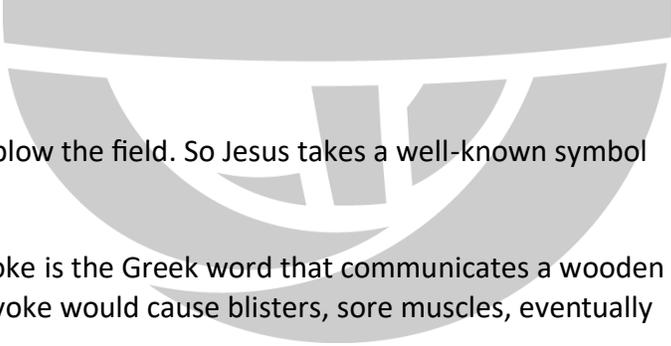
That's inviting. But how does it work? Life is life. We all carry burdens, worries and sometimes they are very difficult, even overwhelming. Our faith isn't magical; so how do we trust it in real, everyday life on a promise like this?

As I thought about this question, three phrases of Jesus stand out for me:
"my yoke is easy," "learn from me," and "you will find rest for your souls."

I. MY YOKE IS EASY

Yokes are an important invention, but not so visible today as in Jesus' time.

I was introduced to their importance when we needed to get from one lake to the next in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. I discovered that with a yoke on the 85 pound aluminum Gruman canoe, I could transport it over the portage alone more easily than two people could do so carrying it on front and back.



When oxen were domesticated, the yoke allowed oxen to plow the field. So Jesus takes a well-known symbol of burden bearing to make his promise.

But what gets missed in the English translation of “easy” yoke is the Greek word that communicates a wooden yoke made to fit one’s ox. Without the custom fit, any old yoke would cause blisters, sore muscles, eventually open sores and pain for the ox.

The powerful idea here is that Jesus is promising that the yoke he gives us is a personal one, made to fit our life situation. If you think about this, Jesus’ custom-fitted yoke suggests that God’s purposes for us fit our gifts and passions. We all know that when doing what we are gifted with, there is much more satisfaction and joy in the work.

The German language reflects this insight: “gabe” means gift and “aufgabe” means assignment. The assignment comes out of one’s gift.

We begin to see how Jesus’ image of yoke relates to the spiritual journey of coming into one’s “true self” from the “false one.” We think of Augustine’s observation that, “We do not find our rest until we rest in Thee.”

As I reflect on my own journey of faith, I now feel more at home in my own skin than ever before. I trust God, partly because I see the wisdom and grace in the way I’ve been led, often finding the gift of being who I am - - sensing a real fit. There is life-giving Presence at work.

“My yoke is easy” seems to mean: “in Christ, our yoke is made to fit who we are and who we will be..”

II. LEARN FROM ME, FOR I AM GENTLE AND HUMBLE OF HEART

Faith doesn’t necessarily just happen in our lives. It develops within us as we journey in life. We learn it.

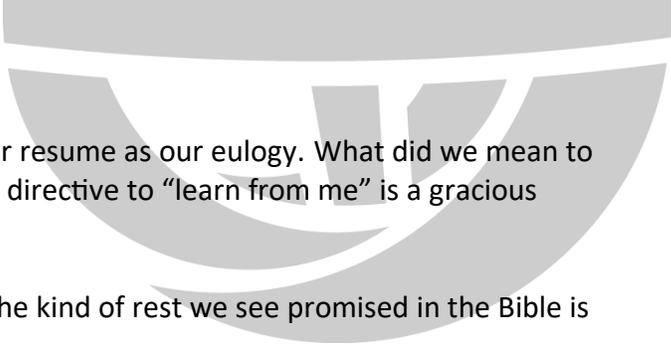
The word “disciple” means “learner.” Often we learn by doing, just as we learn faith by following. The image of Jesus this calls forth is that of a coach, a mentor, or guide, besides that of Lord and Savior.

Notice then the words with which he describes his friendship, his guiding presence: “humble” and “gentle.” This is anything but a taskmaster, the common posture of leaders in Jesus’ time.

Parents or grandparents, you delight when you see your child or grandchild thrive under a coach he/she likes. They have a way about them that draws out commitment and effort, even excellence your kids didn’t know they had.

So think about the effect of journeying with Jesus over a lifetime. It has been illustrated elsewhere that a 747 might take off from LA on a flight path that looks right - -but is off-course in the most minuscule way. One might think the difference is negligible, but by the time it reaches the East Coast, its landing will be in Washington D.C. not NYC. Small changes in direction make big differences over long journeys. It reminds me of the poem by Robert Frost —the last line on his taking “a road less traveled,” which is, “And that has made all the difference.”





The difference it will make for us may not be as much in our resume as our eulogy. What did we mean to others? What impact did we have through our lives? Jesus' directive to "learn from me" is a gracious opportunity for one's life journey.

The third phrase has to do with our very souls. Coming to the kind of rest we see promised in the Bible is something only God can give.

III. YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS

A lot of following Jesus is about little things: directions taken, learned, commitments made, but in this very congregation, many of you can also recall special times...when it seemed like God touched you on the shoulder...total surprise too...but something changed.

Jesus opens to us a relationship with our MYSTERIOUS CREATOR. God won't be measured, or put in a box, and often works in hidden ways, through our everyday lives. That said, however, the promises Jesus makes are too big to confine them all to hidden, organic increments over a lifetime. When Jesus invites us to "come to me" this will include the whole range of our human struggles, dangers, opportunities. And sometimes, as many of you know from experience, we are tapped on the shoulder in the most unexpected ways--powerful ways sometimes--the kind of experiences we remember for the rest of our lives.

Here is one story, told by SUSANNAH HESCHEL in a recent interview in *Christian Century*.

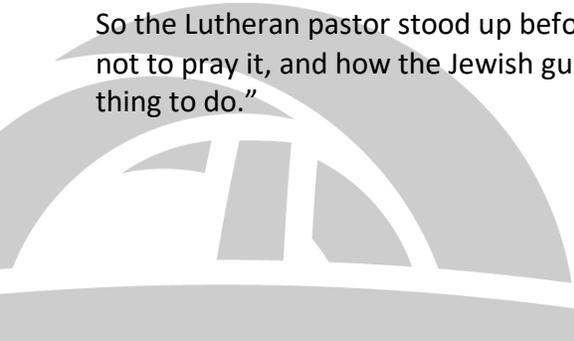
It is 1986 and Susannah Heschel (the daughter of the famous American Rabbi Abraham Heschel) is a graduate student invited to accompany other students and professors to East Germany for an interfaith dialog sponsored by the Lutheran Church. Such an event in itself is a huge departure from the repression of the church under Communism, where there could be no gatherings except for Sunday worship services - - and even these were discouraged. But things have loosened up and this trip offers an opportunity for discussion of Jewish-Christian relationships. The last part of the two-week trip culminates with a two-day seminar.

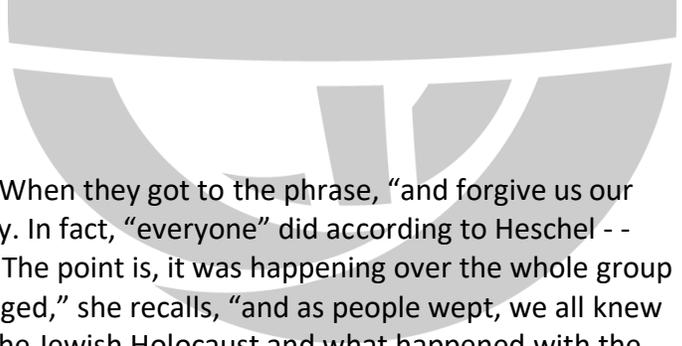
The seminar drew several hundred people. There were presentations and discussions, but Susannah Heschel sensed a lack of receptivity, and found many of the questions laced with typical Jewish prejudices and stereotypes. As they neared the concluding session, she asked one of the Lutheran pastors how they should end.

"Let's do the Lord's Prayer" came the answer. Heschel said "no," that's a Christian prayer and this is an interfaith dialog." So they decided to close by each reading the same Psalm, Heschel in Hebrew, and the pastor in German.

When they got to the end and had finished reading the Psalm, Susannah had a strong sense, "we aren't done yet." So she approached the pastor and whispered in his ear, "I think we should do the Lord's Prayer." "Are you sure?" replied the pastor, "You earlier said we should not." "Yes," replied Susannah, "but now I think we should close with that."

So the Lutheran pastor stood up before the group. But before they prayed, she told them about the decision not to pray it, and how the Jewish guest had now asked that they should pray it, sensing that this was a good thing to do."





So they began praying, in German, slowly and reflectively. When they got to the phrase, “and forgive us our sins,” a strange thing began to happen. People began to cry. In fact, “everyone” did according to Heschel - - and whether that means literally everyone, it matters not. The point is, it was happening over the whole group of otherwise stand-offish Germans. “The whole room changed,” she recalls, “and as people wept, we all knew what it was about without saying anything.” It was about the Jewish Holocaust and what happened with the Nazi’s. It was a different group that departed the seminar. The feeling was changed.

I imagine that in a repressive regime after World War II, there was no room for public discussion about this most terrible crime - - at least not in any religious way. But clearly this group of Lutheran Christians had been carrying a terrible burden of guilt and shame, and such things unvoiced and unconfessed have a way of eating at the soul. In that surprising moment, something transformative happened. And it began with Susannah Heschel following her sense that things weren’t over - - an act of caring - - and asking that the Lord’s Prayer be said. And it happened during the familiar phrase - - prayed many times before this day - - but now in the context of a Jewish woman acting in sensitivity to them. Who does that but God? Who releases the burden of sin but Christ?

I tell the story because there are times when God shows up in palpable ways, usually by surprise, and something within us is touched on the deepest level, and a burden is lifted, a way of looking at things is changed, trust and love are renewed.

When Jesus promises rest for your soul, his meaning goes far deeper than we know. This much we come to know: we can trust his promise, his invitation, and his command.

