



Ash Wednesday  
February 21, 2007  
Lenten Vespers 1

Matthew 11:28-30  
“The Easy Yoke”  
M. Craig Barnes

Lent is a forty day period in the church’s year in which we renew our commitment to Christian discipleship and respond to the call to follow Jesus Christ all the way to the cross so that on Easter we too might discover the new and transformed life that looks more like Christ’s own life. Throughout vespers in Lent, we will be looking at the Beatitudes, which are provided in the fifth chapter of Matthew, the “Blessed are the…” text.

To introduce the Beatitudes, I thought it would be helpful to look at the call to take on the yoke of Christ also found in Matthew, chapter 11, because this provides the context for understanding the Beatitudes not as an achievement, but as a blessing.

“Take my yoke upon you,” Jesus says. Remember that the people to whom he spoke were primarily agricultural. They had very clear ideas about a yoke. It was a device used to couple animals, usually oxen, and typically for the purpose of driving a plow or pulling a cart. The yoke kept them harnessed into what was difficult, trudging work.

As Jesus was speaking to a Jewish audience, this yoke also had metaphorical power to it. It was the symbol for slavery. Frequently, the prophets would talk about the yoke of oppression or the yoke of slavery that the people experienced when they were in Egypt. When the people first went to Egypt, when Jacob brought his family there following Joseph, they were fleeing famine. They went to find food, to find prosperity and a future. Things started out well enough for them in Egypt, but as the generations passed, a new pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph or care for his God, so he cast the Hebrews into slavery. What started out as freedom ended up as slavery—the yoke of oppression, the trudging, hard work of slavery. These were the first things that came to people’s minds when Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you.”

Maybe it’s just because it’s February, but it seems to me that a lot of us are trudging along these days. Maybe work feels for you— well, like work and not so much an adventure. Because of the severity of your schedule, you find that you have little time to nurture intimacy in your relationships or even friendships. Or maybe it seems like there is always something wrong with your health. You get over one thing and you get smitten by the next thing. In February, the higher octaves of joy are harder to hear. Some of us, maybe even many of us, are like oxen slowly trudging through the day. What started out as a story of freedom feels like drudgery.

But it doesn’t really matter, because you’re yoked to “how it is.” And now, it’s Ash Wednesday and we begin this journey behind Jesus. Doesn’t Jesus help with any of this? Yes. Oh, yes! But maybe not the way you are thinking.

“Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden,” Jesus says, “And I will give you rest.” Well, so far, so good. That’s what we wanted to hear. That sounds like a vacation, doesn’t it? Jesus goes on to say, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...because my yoke is easy.” Now, what does that mean? How can a yoke be easy? That sounds like an oxymoron. Yokes are binding. They enslave us. It doesn’t sound easy.

Well, it’s not easy to define “easy.” Typically, when we hear the word, we think it means stress free, not difficult or burdensome. “That was an easy test. No pressure. Hey, I’ll just be easy.” Or it means, “no wait, very convenient, instant service.” Easy.

Ironically, in trying to make our lives easier, we somehow always seem to make them harder. We have never had so much as a society, yet never before has our literature depicted such emptiness. We have every time-saving device imaginable and many that were not imagined as possible ten years ago. And yet, do we have more time? Have they really saved us time? Have they made life easier for us?

We have extraordinary, high-tech communications and yet, loneliness is a national epidemic. We’ve got lots of communications devices, little phones. You can even make movies now with them. Lots of communications, but no communion. So, in spite of our incredible standard of living, life is not easy. And now we have Jesus promising to make it easy with a yoke. How will that work?

The word ‘easy’ in the Greek, ‘crestos,’ has a connotation which is ‘good.’ That is what it means—that which is good, that which is fitting, that which is kind. It has nothing to do with convenience. It has everything to do with character, with that which is fitting of character. That’s why we’ll be looking at the Beatitudes which describe character, one who is spirit-filled in Christ.

So, when Jesus says his yoke is easy, it’s easy not because its stress free. It’s easy because it’s fitting. It’s the yoke we were designed to wear. The work of goodness and kindness is hard. It’s hard to be good sometimes. It’s hard to be kind sometimes. You can think of someone today you had a very hard time being kind to. That’s hard, but it’s fitting. It’s the ease of doing what you were designed to do.

The salvation Jesus offers is not one that removes burden, but one that gives us the right burden to bear—like the burdens of goodness and kindness. There is nothing that is as enslaving as the illusion that we can find freedom by casting off responsibility or by doing less. That’s our favorite mythology. We’re constantly thinking, “I’ll be OK if I can just get rid of something from my busy schedule. If I can just get rid of *this* thing, then it will be perfect.” But as the consistency of the effort illustrates, there is nothing as enslaving as this myth, this illusion that we’ll find freedom by doing less. Freedom is not found by doing less or by letting go of things, but by holding, bearing the right things, the things that are fitting—the things that make you good, kind—easy.

Remember that a yoke linked two oxen together. So, what Jesus is offering when he says, “Take my yoke upon you,” is the invitation to be bound up with him. If it’s Jesus’ yoke you’re wearing,

that means you'll go where Jesus goes. You're yoked to him. Some of the places that Jesus goes will seem like difficult places, places you'd rather not go, like back to work.

But do remember that if Jesus is the one taking you there, then it's not to break your back. It is only to witness, to see, his work. His work can be found as the sacred subtext beneath every meeting or deal or piece of paper that we push around. The holiness is always there, but you have to hang around Jesus to recognize it. That's why we have things like vespers in Lent, to renew our vision of this Jesus to whom we are yoked.

*Benediction:* The more you pay attention to Jesus at work, in the course of the day, the more you find that you, yourself, are being made into a blessing, a beatitude. Amen.