



Pentecost 4: July 6, 2014
Visitation to St. David's, Delta
The Rt. Rev. Melissa Skelton

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Jesus said to the crowd, "To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

At 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; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All 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.

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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."

I'm in the Atlanta airport coming home from a week in Virginia at a training session for new bishops when I walk by a portion of a wall in the airport that reflects my own image back to me.

There I am, a woman with short grey hair walking with great purpose, pulling a roller bag behind me. This image did not surprise me—for I know about the grey hair and the purposeful walk. But what I did not fully realize until I saw it, was the size of the black pack that hung on my back. Yes, I knew that it was unwieldy and hard to maneuver under my seat on the airplane. What I did not fully realize was just how enormous it was.

My backpack was, of course, full of important things yesterday—a laptop, a quart-size, re-sealable plastic bag filled with liquids and gels, each under 4 ounces; a calendar and a notebook where I could record plans, ideas and doodles during the flight; an issue of *The New York Times* from a week ago containing a stimulating article that I wanted to save; a collection of books that I might want to read; pens, paper clips and a hair brush—you get the idea—all things that I thought I just had to have on my flight home.

Our Gospel for today is addressed to those of us carrying heavy loads, toting enormous burdens, whether we are aware of them or not. It begins with these words from Jesus:

“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,” and ends with these words that many of us know and love: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.”

As a fifteen-year-old young man getting ready for confirmation, theologian Paul Tillich was told that he needed to choose a passage from the Bible as the expression of his personal approach to the Biblical message and to the Christian Church. He, like every other confirmand, was to choose such a passage and recite it before the congregation. The young Tillich chose the words of our Gospel this morning, the words that I just read.

After reciting the passage, one of the adult members of his Lutheran congregation asked him (with no small amount of astonishment and even a bit of irony) why he had chosen that particular passage. For, after all, the young man was living under happy conditions, and, being a mere fifteen years old, was not laboring or carrying a heavy burden.

As Tillich tells the story, he could not give a good answer at the time for his choice. In retrospect, however, Tillich felt his choice was completely right because, these words were, he believed, true for adolescents and adults alike—true “in all periods of (a person’s) life, and under all conditions of their internal and external history.”

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.”

Yes, these words were magnetic, appealing and true for all, Tillich said. But what, he went on to ask, did they really mean? What kind of burden was Jesus talking about? What did Jesus

mean by inviting his listeners to take his yoke upon him? And why would this yoke be easy and its burden light?

These were the very questions I once brought to a little informal group at a clergy gathering during a conference some years ago at this very same time of the year, for a number of us there were priests and would need to preach this morning.

And so I asked a group of my priest colleagues: “What do you make of this passage?” “What approach are you going to use in your sermon?”

Finally, one of them replied: “What I’m going to do is to talk about the kind of yoke animals would’ve have used in ancient times. They were double yokes, so that two animals could pull something in tandem. Using this image, what Jesus might mean here is that he will be our second in whatever yoke we are already in, he will help us bear whatever burden it is we are trying to carry, making our burden easier, lighter.”

But this did not sound right to me: that our Jesus, our bold embodiment of the God’s dignifying, liberating and loving power is primarily about simply walking yoked to us as we continue to bear our burdens.

And so I went exploring where I should’ve gone in the first place, and this is what I found.

The words in this passage, the passage chosen by the adolescent Tillich as most expressive of the Christian faith, words like “labor,” “rest” and “yoke” and phrases like “carrying heavy burdens” were frequently associated with the exercise of power, especially imperial and political rule. And so perhaps Jesus was not talking about getting in a double yoke with his downtrodden and disenfranchised listeners. Rather he was talking about casting off the yoke of imperial and political rule, a yoke that was crippling his listeners. And perhaps he was also inviting these same to begin living into the reign of God that he came to inaugurate, a reign in which God’s people no longer carry the burden of oppression but take on a different kind of responsibility and “burden,” if you will, toward one another.

Under this understanding, then, those who are under any kind of yoke of oppression are being told to cast it off so that they can take on an entirely different kind of yoke—a yoke given them and us by a new master—the Lord of Love who asks us to bear the burdens of our fellows, not the burdens of oppressors.

And so this morning, what are the yokes of your oppression—the burdens that rob you of your dignity? Where in your world are you surrounded by those who are also bearing heavy burdens? Another way of saying this is: If you were to catch a glimpse of yourself in a magic mirror, what would you see on your back, weighing you down? How is it keeping you from the full dignity that is yours, a dignity that at its best makes us available to bear the burdens of others?

In getting ready to come here to St. David’s, I’ve done a lot of learning some of the burdens that this parish has been carrying for while—burdens related to painful events of the past. While Jesus perhaps did not have these kinds of burdens, the memories of a painful past, in mind when he spoke the words of our Gospel, I cannot help but think that he would have

recognized that a painful past can oppress and limit an entire community's sense of dignity in the present and an entire community's sense of hope for the future.

And so I imagine Jesus, our Jesus, saying to all of us this morning: while you cannot undo the past, you can, with God's help, lay down the burden that it has given you. You can both receive and accept your wounds and refuse to be defined by them.

For God did not make us for slavery and oppression, whether that slavery and oppression comes at the hands of an empire that keeps its people in thrall or whether that slavery and oppression has come about as a result of anything that has happened to us.. God did not make us for slavery and oppression but instead has given to us the glorious liberty of the sons and daughters of God, a liberty that, once claimed, strangely and wonderfully finds its fulfillment in the choice to bear one another's burdens. A liberty, once claimed, that bears one another's burdens. A liberty once claimed. A liberty once claimed.