

## The Yoke of Freedom

Missy Harris

Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30

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*But 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."*

When Ken Sehested asked me to preach today, he suggested that I speak to the importance of the work with our children and youth here at Circle of Mercy. You have already heard from two of our youth about how significant this particular experience was for them and 135 youth from 8 different churches.

The camp we attended follows a seven-year lectionary cycle, and this year our theme was "Creation." Where does your mind take you when you hear the word *creation*? For me, I initially think of Genesis and the creation stories given to us there. But our time at camp focused on a broader understanding of creation – particularly, how we are created in God's image, and how we continue to participate in the ongoing creation and re-creation that takes place within us, in other people, and in the larger world around us.

While we were at camp last week, I had the verses we just read from Matthew's gospel running in the background of my mind. As we were focused on creation and re-creation, these verses served as the backdrop for me.

Our text tonight from the Gospel of Matthew is a rich and confusing one, at least to me it is. I am going to focus our attention on the last few verses. *The Message* interprets verses 28-30 in this way: *"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 the Revised Standard Version we heard read tonight, we heard the language of "Take my yoke upon you. . . My burden is easy, and my yoke is light." Given that we don't encounter literal yokes in our daily lives, maybe we should examine this image a little more closely.

One way that Merriam Webster defines yoke is as "a frame fitted to a person's shoulders to carry a load in two equal portions." This makes me think back to the trail cleanup we did in the fall when one of our youth and I created a "yoke" of sorts with a limb so that we could carry out part of an old lawnmower that someone had dumped in the Laurel River in Madison County. I'd be the first to admit (and I'm guessing he might say the same) that there's no way either of us alone would have been able to carry the lawnmower two miles out of the woods. It wasn't easy by any means, and the limb made our shoulders ache, but by sharing the weight with our makeshift yoke, we successfully made it out with the lawnmower together.

When I looked up "yoke" in my Bible concordance, which shows every other place in the Bible where a particular word is used, I found that the majority of times this word is used is in the context of feeling oppressed by a "yoke," or where a "yoke" is intentionally made to feel heavier, the load more burdensome.

But the image we get in Matthew is a little different. The yoke Jesus invites his listeners to take on is intended to make the burden lighter. It's like the yoke that is used to help farm animals such as oxen or cows work together to accomplish a task that one of the animals could not complete on its own.

The yoke that Jesus offers shares the burden or load between two people or between God and us. In his use of the yoke image, Jesus reminds us that if we take on the yoke of discipleship, we don't carry the heaviness and burden of life alone. We do this with each other in community, and this is where we find hope. This is where we learn with each other to live the "unforced rhythms of grace."

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When I was 19, not much older than some of our youth, I learned something about the importance of community and "the unforced rhythms of grace." It was my first summer as a volunteer at Jubilee Partners in Comer, Georgia. I was working with, and teaching English as a Second Language classes to, refugees from Vietnam and Bosnia.

July 4<sup>th</sup> rolled around, and the community decided to take everyone into Athens to join in the festivities, see the fireworks, and have some time to relax with each other. The bus ride to Athens was fun. Kids were running around, practicing their new English skills, adults were talking. We arrived at the festival grounds, spread out our blankets, played cards, sang songs, enjoyed the food we had packed and waited with each other as the light faded and the evening grew dark.

I found myself sitting between two women, Fatma and Branca. Both were from Bosnia and were probably in their early 50s. They were in my English class, so we practiced the words we shared in common, made lots of gestures, made lots of mistakes (my Serbo-Croatian was much worse than their English), and laughed a lot.

As *The Star Spangled Banner* began to play in the distance, the fireworks show began. Explosions of color began to light up the night sky, but terror began to set in on either side of me. Branca and Fatma grabbed my arms. They buried their faces into my shoulders and sobbed. The 15 minutes of fireworks were agonizing.

There was nowhere to go to shield them from the explosions that immediately took them back to the horrors of real bombs that had burst into the air around their homes in the recent past. Even if we had tried to make it back to the bus together, we would not have escaped the relentless explosions and flashes of light that reminded them of all that they had lost and all that had been. Given the language barrier, I couldn't say any comforting words or indicate that it would soon come to an end. We just had to sit there and wait it out.

As a 19-year-old, I felt like I was in way over my head. After we returned to Jubilee Partners, I couldn't get this experience and the image of Branca and Fatma out of my mind. It was in the context of community that I was able to begin sorting this out, naming what had happened, re-thinking the decision to take the entire community into Athens for a celebration that could elicit so much trauma, figuring out how to continue being present with Branca and Fatma when we couldn't use words to talk about what happened.

I have no idea how they sorted it all out within themselves, but I do know that every time I went to visit them after July 4 that summer, they would fix me a tiny cup of very strong coffee, filling it with milk and squares of sugar, and prepare a plate of Bosnian bread and *burek* (something like pastry filled with meat – and I ate it without hesitation and with gratitude, even though I am a vegetarian). While we shared coffee and meals, they would often just take my hand in their hands and pat it. Or, they would put their hands on my face and softly nod their heads and smile, usually ending by sticking their fingers in my dimples and laughing.

On their porches, I profoundly experienced what I would name as "the unforced rhythms of grace." In conversations with others in the community about the experience, I felt the same. Being present with Fatma and Branca while the fireworks were booming and exploding around us felt like anything but grace, freedom, or lightness in the moment. However, in the context of community and in meals on their porches, we shared the pain and emotions around the experience, often without words.

We were with each other, and not one of us had to be alone. Don't get me wrong, none of this erased the pain they had experienced in their home countries or on that July 4<sup>th</sup> evening. But ultimately, there was safety and lightness and freedom with each other. Maybe it was better to experience the fireworks there in the context of a known, trusted, and safe community, than to witness them for the first time when they were on their own in Atlanta.

Now you might be wondering what this has to do with our own children and youth. You may make your own conclusions, but here are a few of my thoughts:

After spending a week with kids and youth from churches similar to Circle of Mercy in philosophy and theology, I was reminded once again that the work with our kids and youth is of utmost importance. At camp, worship was planned and led by youth. Youth proclaimers shared stories each night about their own lives and faith journeys.

I heard time and time again that this particular camp is a place of refuge, a place of safety, a place where they can be wholly and completely who they are, as they are. One youth even commented that Baptist Youth Camp is the *only* place in his life where he feels at home. I found myself both encouraged and saddened by his statement. I was grateful for the presence of this camp in his life, but I also felt a challenge to continue being intentional about creating this kind of environment for our youth here in this community the other 52 weeks of the year.

You might be wondering why the pair of dirty hiking shoes and toilet brush are on our communion table. On our first night at camp, each church was asked to bring a symbol of the birth, or a time of re-creation, in their congregation as a way of introducing us to the larger camp. We took the hiking boots to represent how Circle of Mercy emerged on a hike in a conversation between our pastors Joyce Hollyday, Ken Sehested, and Nancy Hastings Sehested 10 years ago.

Community United Church of Christ in Raleigh brought a toilet brush. One of their youth shared how there are transgender members of their community. Having bathrooms labeled only for Men and Women created anxiety for their transgender members, not knowing which restroom to use, fearing that they might make others uncomfortable with *either* choice they made. Since both of the bathrooms were for one person to use at a time, the youth came up with the idea of making all the bathrooms unisex, open to anyone. It was a very small change but one that made their community more inclusive and helped others feel at home – “the unforced rhythms of grace.”

One evening in worship at camp, a youth declared his sexual orientation publicly in the presence of 135 other youth, some of whom he knew well and others whom he had just met. The trust and safety established and created over the past 20 years within the camp community enabled him to freely and safely be himself, surrounded by the support and tears and hugs of his friends, mentors, and peers.

Throughout the week, others approached the youth, sharing their own stories, questions, and struggles. It was the community that held him, a community where he could express himself when he felt most vulnerable *and* most confident. It is the places that hold both of these in tension, where we find “the unforced rhythms of grace” extended with abundance.

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During our last worship service, a youth shared how he has not experienced difficult events or trauma in his life, but that his experience at camp is a sustaining presence for him throughout the year. He communicated the depth of connection he feels in this community through his choked voice and tears – “the unforced rhythms of grace.”

For our work here in the Circle, it is imperative that we create safe spaces for our youth and children to name their questions, to name their doubts, and to name their fears. But, we can't stop there. If we did, I'm not sure that we would appeal to very many youth, or adults for that matter. We must provide a foundation of hope, a connection with what makes it all worthwhile, a connection with each other in ways that sustain us when we are in our most vulnerable states.

What does this look like? Well, I think it looks different for every youth and child among us.

- It may mean that they find a listening ear, someone taking them seriously if they voice doubts or questions about this whole endeavor we are part of together.
- It may mean that they experience with us huge celebrations of accomplishments in their lives, *especially* those that connect with what makes them feel most alive in the world.
- It may mean that they continue to hear the stories of how we, as adults, have faced and continue to face challenges that seem so huge and insurmountable to them.
- It may mean that they hear the stories of how we, as adults, really don't have it all figured out and how we continue to be re-created in our own lives.
- It may mean that we need to be more intentional and explicit about where we find our hope and what makes this work we do together worthwhile. What is it that keeps us going?
- It may mean that our children and youth need to hear about the ways that they are teaching us, the adults, what it is that we are learning from them.

Getting back to our text for tonight – I can't help thinking of the Rolling Stones song "You Can't Always Get What You Want" when I read the first part of the text:

*No, you can't always get what you want  
You can't always get what you want  
You can't always get what you want  
And if you try sometime you find  
You get what you need.*

The adults around Jesus knew what they were waiting for, and they were so sure of what they were waiting for that they often missed Jesus' presence right in front of them. We see this time and time again in the stories that we have about Jesus' life. Sometimes, they picked up on the clues, paid close enough attention and found that, even though they were not getting what they wanted, all that they needed was right in front of them.

Why is it that Jesus reveals himself and important information to the little ones – infants in this case? What is it that enables the children to see and receive what adults seem to miss and overlook?

Well, I think part of the answer is that children and youth don't necessarily have all of the filters and baggage that we carry around. They often can cut to the heart of the matter directly and succinctly, while we adults dance around, trying to figure out the best way to say or do something. I see our kids and youth looking for the hope, seeking and searching for what it is that makes this all worthwhile.

So, maybe it's time for us, the adults, to do some listening. I witness the hope in the lives of our youth and kids. I hear the hope and the search for it, in their questions. Maybe this is part of why I love hanging out with the kids and youth. The more I am with them, the more I learn.

In their midst, I see community. In their midst, I see examples of how to live freely and lightly. In their midst, I learn more and more about "the unforced rhythms of grace." Let's take up this yoke alongside our kids and youth. Maybe if we listen intently, we too will be re-created in ways we never imagined possible. And maybe, just maybe, we can see that what we need is already right in front of us.

Amen.