

Year A Proper 14 Dancing to the Flute of Jesus Christ Matthew 11, 16 to 19, 25 to 30

Jesus doesn't pull any punches here. He's talking to the religious leaders and he says, "You're like a bunch of kids whom there's just no pleasing. I come playing the flute, announcing the kingdom, and you call me a drunkard. John the Baptist wailed and mourned your sins, announcing the coming of the Lord, and you called him a crazy man, possessed by a demon. Whether we rejoice or whether we mourn, the kingdom is at hand and you won't believe it and turn back to God. Let's just face it – you don't *want* to believe.

And, you know, Jesus wasn't surprised by their reaction. Jesus goes on – with more than a hint of sarcasm – Jesus goes on to thank God that God has hidden these things from the wise and intelligent. These smart, "we know the Scripture inside out and backwards" sort of people dismissed Jesus. They did not believe Jesus was the Messiah, sent by God, even though they saw him heal, they saw him cast out demons with a touch, sometimes even just a word. They did not believe even though they knew of his miracles. When some guy feeds 5000 people with a couple of fish and walks on water, that sort of news gets around.

Jesus is asking the leaders to believe in him, to follow him. He is asking them to turn to God, to live in God's kingdom the way they are meant to live. And the leaders respond by closing their eyes and plugging their ears.

And so Jesus turns to the children – the ones who supposedly don't know as much as the leaders, the ones who need to be taught. Jesus turns to them and he says, "Your leaders have rejected me, they refuse to understand but not you. You get it...God has revealed the truth to you, the children."

For those who believe, the ones who follow – those Jesus names as children – Jesus compares this to them wearing his yoke. A yoke was something that would have been very familiar to his listeners. Picture a young girl using a wooden yoke, resting across the back of her neck and shoulders, a yoke that let's her carry two buckets of water weighing nearly as much as she does – a bucket dangling from a rope at each end of the yoke. A yoke is a very useful tool and serves a purpose to make life a little better. A yoke across the neck of a large pair of oxen leads them and guides them so that they don't go their own way and so that they work together, sharing the burden.

Jesus asks us to take on his yoke, to let him lead us, guide us, share our burdens. The problem is we have more than one yoke. We *all* harness our lives to something: another person, work, family, success, a political agenda, even our reputation. Sometimes our yokes are the invisible things like fear, anxiety, depression, and anger, or certain beliefs and opinions that we refuse to change. Our yokes are the relationships and attachments that we believe give meaning to our lives and, for better or worse, they give our lives direction.

But, because we are Christians, Jesus' yoke is to be the one that takes precedence over all of the others. We are to follow Jesus before all else. We are to love God before all else. The way of life in God's kingdom will set the direction for everything else we do.

And yet, we are like the little children in the marketplace, unhappy with whatever is offered to us. John didn't eat and drink – he must be nuts. Jesus *did* eat and drink – he must be a sinful partyer and alcoholic. Picking on the petty rather than looking more deeply at the foundation, the reasons for what we see, is often the

judgmental human way of avoiding looking at ourselves and of maintaining control. We want to shape the gospel to fit our lives, our beliefs, our desires, and agendas rather than allowing the gospel to shape us, to desire what God desires for us. We want to worship God on Sundays, pray if or when we find the time, and work our volunteer activities into a busy schedule. You won't hear this phrase in a bible study I'm leading but, I'm quite sure sometime along the way you will have heard someone ask, "How can we apply this scripture to our lives?" We are absolutely not meant to take God's word and God's ways and fit them into our lives. My ways are not your ways, says God through the prophet Isaiah. And my thoughts are not your thoughts. We are not to try to fit God into our lives but to fit our lives into God. We are not to fit God's word into our lives but to fit our lives into God's word. There is a huge difference. Paul Ricoeur proclaims our God as a "speaker of a new word who breaks open all that is settled, routine, and conventional" (from Walter Brueggemann, *Hope Restored*, p.5). "God can shatter the known world in order to establish a new historical possibility" (p.5). God does not want us to fit him into the brokenness of our lives and of this world, be a tiny little beacon of light in the midst of all the darkness. God desires to banish the darkness, mend the brokenness, make all things whole: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating..." (Is.65:17-18)...a new creation, one of wholeness. When we think of where we are and where the world is at – with violence, oppression, racism, injustice, pettiness, a climate teetering on the edge of destruction – the logical progression of our reality does not lead us to the fully mended world of God's kingdom. We are not to squeeze God into this brokenness and think that will make things better. That

won't work. Our ways won't get us to where God is bringing us. We are to hand things over to God and pray with mind, with heart, and with action: Thy will be done, striving with God according to God's ways and toward the fulfillment of God's purpose.

We want to be in control, though, and letting go of that control, letting God be in charge is not easy. What *feels* easy is to go along with the system guided and directed by the religious and political leaders. Actually, nowadays, it would be the economic and political leaders as religious leaders have taken a backseat. We are led to believe that if we follow the system, fit into the system, life will be much better. If we dance when we are told to dance and if we wail when we are told to wail. This works for a chunk of people...a certain cross-section of our population...but the system leaves many others out in the cold. The better the system works for you, the less likely you are to want to leave that system behind and live according to God's ways which, in many ways, clash with our current system. Perhaps you've noticed, though, that this system is noticeably working for only those with power, with position, with prosperity. Because, even if you supposedly fit the mold for those whom the system benefits, it won't necessarily be the case that it does. In an effort to be diverse and inclusive, the Church – when filling various leadership roles – seems to be more and more often leaving out the older, white, straight males. Government institutions are getting a reputation for doing this as well. This isn't the way things are supposed to work either. We should not need to try so hard to be inclusive. God has already made room for everyone who wants to be in God's kingdom. We need to open our eyes and realize this. Yet, convinced that if we just try harder, the world's ways will eventually be to our benefit and make life easy, we continue to bear the yokes of

the world that do not and cannot free us from humanity's brokenness because the people in power don't want to change and nobody, without God's transforming love within, *can* change.

Yokes mean work. If you're wearing a yoke, you are working at a task. It's strange, then, that Jesus says to be led and guided by his yoke is easy. It is helpful to know that the Greek word many versions of the bible translate as "easy" actually means well-fitting and suitable. Jesus' yoke is well-fitting and suitable for us. It's perfect for us, it was made for us. We are meant to be in perfect relationship with God. We were created to be in perfect relationship with God.

To allow the world's yokes to take charge is to choose a life that is less than what we were created for. Choosing the world will leave us feeling fragmented and weary. Our worship will leave us empty and our good works will feel *only* like work. God tells us today that we, the weary and the burdened, can lay these burdens at Jesus' feet. We can shed the weariness of the constant competition of an "every man for themselves" world. God desires to refresh and restore us, to mend us, to heal us, to make us whole. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God declares, "I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish [greedy political powers] from the land, so that they may live...securely...The trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the earth shall yield its increase...they shall know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke [and end oppression], and save them from the hands of those who enslaved them" (Ezekiel 34:25-31, interpreted according to Brueggemann's arguments p.8).

To allow God to shape our lives, to allow Jesus' yoke to take charge and lead the way is to find rest for our souls. It doesn't mean we won't be tired and it doesn't

mean it's going to be easy but it will be the refreshing joy of hope found in moving with God toward the perfection of life in his kingdom. Fragmented lives will give way to wholeness of heart, sharing our burdens with God, allowing God to lead.

To take on the yoke of Jesus is to take on his life. "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me," he says. "Let your heart love like my heart. Let your feet walk where my feet would go. Let your hands touch those I would touch. Let your eyes see as my eyes see God everywhere, in everyone, in the beauty and sacredness of all things.

We will mourn. Like John the Baptist we will bewail, and should bewail, our sin and the brokenness of this world because those are the ones who know hope – those who recognize the failings of the world and cry against them are the ones who keep the present open to new and wonderful interventions from our God who promises and keeps promises. The ones who hope are the ones who dance. Let us dance in God's kingdom to the flute of Jesus Christ.