

Matthew 11: Being Yoked

As I was reading the gospel passage, did any of you notice something of a disconnect between what we usually find Jesus saying and what is recorded here in this passage? A couple of weeks ago when the passage from Genesis which included the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael from Abraham's camp—that separating of these two from the family—I spoke of the evidence we have even from the Hebrew Scriptures that God's grace is abundant and surrounds us; that sometimes we have our eyes closed and fail to see. Today's passage makes us uncomfortable for the opposite reason. We don't expect to hear Jesus pronouncing harsh judgments. And, if I kept strictly to the reading as established by the lectionary— judgment, especially harsh judgment wouldn't have been heard this morning either. The lectionary excludes verses 20 through 24 which begin "Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent." However, if you omit those verses, then the opening of the passage doesn't make much sense. Beginning with the opening verse we catch a glimpse of the human part of Jesus' nature; the frustration which he feels as he is bringing the kingdom to the people and they do not understand or respond to his words about how those within God's kingdom are to live. Matthew 11: 16 has Jesus comparing those folks to whom he has brought the message—this generation—to children who are sitting in the marketplace attempting to play games, but finding they cannot agree on the game and so remains sitting on the ground. Some complain: "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance." Others have a different type of play in mind saying, "We wailed, and you did not mourn." One group of children wants to play "wedding" but can't get the others to dance, while the other group wants to play "funeral" but can't get the others to mourn with them. Here mourning and dancing are linked so that they coincide with the different casts of John the Baptist's and Jesus' ministries. While Jesus, like John, announces the advent of the kingdom—the reign of God—the two ministries have not resembled each other in how the proclamation is made. John's proclamation was a harsh and abrasive call to repentance, an offer of redemption from coming judgment which was near, but it was not proclaimed with compassion. It was couched more in terms of a threat. Jesus has come offering healing with compassion. He has issued his proclamation as an invitation to come to him, to be healed and restored. Yet however the proclamation has been made, it seems that few have left the sidelines to join in the dance, even in the cities of Galilee where Jesus has conducted most of his ministry. Here, Jesus is comparing those who are rejecting the proclamation, whether the one John has been making or the one he is currently making to street urchins sitting in the marketplace and refusing to play each other's games. Just as some refused to repent when challenged by John who has withdrawn from society to live his austere life style saying "he has a demon", they also refuse to answer the call of Jesus who lives among them, participates in community even with those considered outcasts by saying, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners." After making these observations about those who are rejecting his proclamation—he insists that what he is doing—the deeds of power and healing that he brings—is his vindication that he is the one who ushers in God's kingdom. These four verses remind us of our inability to box Jesus in, to confine God to our expectations. Jesus points out that "divine wisdom" defies any categories that we may devise. Whether or not people recognize him, he is the one bringing God's kingdom near. These four verses lay out for us the cause for Jesus'

frustration; he has demonstrated by deeds who he is and is frustrated and angry because they do not come. What follows is the “reproach of the cities”—the words of judgment—given for those who have refused to acknowledge him and his proclamation. The omitted verses from the lectionary reading are definitely words of anger over the lack of repentance Jesus is seeing as he brings his message. “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For it the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the Day of Judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you.” Tyre and Sidon were not Jewish cities; their judgment is described as being less because the message has not yet been sent to them. They have not rejected God’s call and the teachings of Jesus. John proclaimed the Messiah held a winnowing fork ready, Jesus now confirms that is possible. “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades.” They have seen deeds of power and have not repented; so on the Day of Judgment there will be a price to pay. Don’t these verses resonate with the words of judgment found in the Hebrew Scriptures as God calls his covenant people to task for their failures to live according to their covenant promises? Much of the anger expressed in the Hebrew Scripture comes from just this same frustration with the covenant people who fail to live according to the guidelines found in God’s ordinances. While mention of judgment is infrequent in the gospel accounts, it is present. Here Jesus has vented his spleen at the hard of heart, non-responders. But even as the sound of these words of judgment fade, the compassion of Jesus again comes to the forefront illustrating God’s steadfast love and faithfulness even to those who remain unrepentant. Jesus turns in a prayer of thanks to the Father for those who have responded. “I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants.” The wise and intelligent may refer to any who have rejected Jesus, but may also be especially addressed to the religious leaders, the Pharisees and scribes who so prided themselves on their knowledge of the law but fail to understand the basics of justice, mercy and faith which form the central core of the message Jesus brought. The “infants” on the other hand are not regarded as important—they are the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted—all of whom Jesus calls blessed. They are the sick, the lame, the lepers and the demon possessed who come to Jesus for healing of body and spirit. It is God’s gracious will to act in ways that confound human wisdom and so the “infants” see what the “wise” cannot—that Jesus is sent by the Father and reveals the Father. Following this prayer where Jesus clearly states his relationship with the Father, Jesus issues a well known invitation: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” This rest carries with it several images—Sabbath rest, the rest of death, the rest when enemies have been subdued. It carries the promise of salvation, of what the world will be when the world is finally ordered according to God’s purposes and enjoys its full and complete Sabbath—it is the promise of life under God’s reign in the new world that Jesus is bringing into being. The invitation doesn’t stop there: 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.” In first century Palestine, the yoke was a familiar symbol of burden bearing, oppression and subjugation. Yokes were laid on the necks and shoulders of oxen and also on prisoners of war and slaves. It carried the implication of a heavy burden. But “yoke” was also used metaphorically with positive connotations in the Jewish tradition, as in the invitation to wisdom in the study and discipline of

the Torah. Unlike some today who view this invitation for the weary and heavy burdened to come and be relieved of their burden, this is actually not a promise of a life of ease. If not that, then what is the yoke Jesus is offering us? We might infer that it is his teachings, his way of discipleship, which is not burdensome but life-giving. Here he invites the weary to learn from him, for he is not a tyrant who oppresses or lords it over his disciples, but is “gentle and humble in heart”. To take his yoke upon oneself is to be yoked to the one in whom God’s kingdom of justice, mercy and compassion is breaking into this world, and in that relationship finding the rest for which the soul longs. I don’t usually do “show and tell” as part of the message, but thought you might like to consider the meaning of something that you see every Sunday—what I wear when I stand before you. Not the robe. The robe itself has nothing to do with my call to this role of service—it is merely an indication that of the educational status which I have achieved. But the strip of cloth that I place around my neck represents something very special—the stole which I wear is the yoke of Christ. I have many—each represents either a different memory for me or a special part of the liturgical cycle of the church—but they all represent that in the vows I took upon ordination that I consider myself yoked to Christ. If you look at our Book of Order, you will find those vows for all positions of leadership in the church are the same except for the last one are the same: That one has to do with the specific role—minister, elder, deacon, Christian educator. The first 3 have to do with profession of faith. The remaining ones are declarations about discipleship. Will you fulfill your ministry in obedience to Jesus Christ, under the authority of Scripture and be continually guided by our confessions? Will you in your own life seek to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love your neighbors and work for the reconciliation of the world? Do you promise to further the peace, unity and purity of the church? Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love? As those belonging to the Reformed tradition, we state that as disciples of Christ we all belong to the priesthood of believers. In other words, as disciples we are all yoked to Christ. Responding to Christ’s invitation does not lead us to a life of ease. Following him will be full of risks and challenges as he has made abundantly clear. He calls us to a life of humble service, service of love and compassion. But in answering the call we find a life of freedom and joy instead of slavery. It is life yoked to Jesus under God’s gracious and merciful reign, free from the burden of sin and the need to prove oneself, free to rest deeply and securely in God’s steadfast love and grace. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

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