

Matthew 11:25-30

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."

Prayer

Yoked

I met Sarah in college, when we were both members of a university political organization. We worked together for what we believed could be a more just and compassionate world..... which, back then, meant phonebanking and canvassing, challenging our rival political organization to a blood donation contest, and trying to get permission for a farmer running for office to bring a live donkey into the amphitheater, among other things....

Sarah and I were both from southwestern Virginia, and we had both left the area to go to college in Charlottesville. She moved to Chapel Hill, became Baha'i, and had three children with her husband.

For months she experienced prolonged episodes of severe pain that doctor after doctor told her were due to "stress" and could be solved if she would relax. The pain was so intense that she couldn't eat or talk.

Eighteen months ago, after she pushed for further testing, she was diagnosed with neuroendocrine cancer.

The cancer had spread through her body.

Sarah died this week in hospice care at age 38.

Her husband, keeping with Baha'i tradition, washed her body and wrapped it in silk. In her passing, he asked for people to remember her by performing acts of service and love in her name.

What matters in life?

Times like this crystallize this question, and this is exactly what Jesus is talking about in today's Scripture reading..... What matters?

What counts in life?

The people Jesus is addressing have come from a Jewish tradition.... They understand the laws of Torah, the laws of Pharisees.... They are familiar with the expression being “yoked to Torah,” which is to say living in obedience with the laws of Judaism....

So Jesus’ language here is intentional.... He is first using accessible language—the agricultural image of the oxen with a yoke.... This is language that everyone who heard it could visualize. And he is replacing the image of a yoke connecting people to rabbinic laws with an image of disciples being yoked to Jesus....

The yoke that Jesus is asking people to wear is discipleship.... It is a call to follow. And he calls his “yoke” light because in contrast with all the laws of the Pharisees, laws governing so many different aspects of conduct, he emphasizes two laws—the call to love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

The word that we hear translated as “easy” is actually not a close translation to the original Greek.... Theologian John Petty suggests that it is better understood as “For my yoke is lovingkindness.” The word *xrestos* can be interpreted as “active benevolence in spite of ingratitude.”

And the word for “rest” is not referring to a summer Sunday nap (as sweet as that may be) but it is actually pointing to Sabbath.... It points to “a refreshment.... The rest that recovers someone...”

And word that we hear as “soul” can be heard as the “essence of a person’s life.”

So hearing this again, we can read the words anew and they sound like this:  
“Take my yoke of lovingkindness upon you, that you may have Sabbath within the essence of your life.”

The yoke that Jesus is asking his followers wear are the two greatest commandments, in contrast with prescriptive rules of religion.

This is a call for us to be yoked to loving neighbor, loving ourselves, loving God.

It is as easy and as difficult as that.

It can be done both immediately and not in full in our lifetime.

This is the yoke that we are invited to wear.....

We are yoked to loving our neighbor.... To love our neighbor enough to name what keeps us from fully living together, and work to connect us.

Aaron Mair spoke at the UCC's General Synod this week.

Aaron told us how in 1984 he moved to the inner city Albany neighborhood of Arbor Hill with his family..... Soon after they arrived there he noticed soot on cars..... He noticed children having trouble breathing.... And watched his own two children continually struggle w/ respiratory infections....

Aaron found out from it was from a toxics incinerator, and that their house rested in the prevailing wind pattern of the incinerator.

So he took this issue and approached environmental groups, expecting their support alongside him.

A co-worker took him to the state meeting of the NY Sierra Club to present the issue. At the time, toxins and landfills were a major topic of discussion in NY.

The Executive Committee listened to his report.

And their response to him was, "Have you gone to the NAACP?"

He brought a major environmental issue to an environmental organization, and he was directed away.

Aaron's white co-worker, who was himself a member of the committee, was appalled. That day he gave Aaron \$250 and began sharing tools and resources for community organizing.

And Aaron went on to organize in the community, working for ten years, organizing civil disobedience and grassroots activism. He ultimately won a \$1.6 million settlement and brought awareness to the environmental racism that allowed this to happen. His case called attention to other times when low-income neighborhoods of people of color were targeted for environmental malpractice.

Loving your neighbor means loving ALL of your neighbor, and it means understanding that we live in a linked world.

In 2015, Aaron became the first African American president of the Sierra Club. One of his goals in the position was to link environmental issues and racism, and work to have a more diverse group of environmentalists.

As Aaron says, "Nature does not discriminate.... Between black or white, rich or poor.... It's politics and humankind who discriminate, who use or misuse nature...."

We cannot love our neighbor in part.

We cannot love our creation without also recognizing the ways that racism has distorted who has access to clean air and water.

We cannot love our creation without recognizing that the poorest countries are the ones who literally receive our trash, the dregs of our world, and who are most immediately impacted by climate change.

Aaron told us at Synod that there is no conservative worship of Jesus, and no liberal worship of Jesus.... But to worship Jesus is to stand for justice.

This standing for justice must be in the place where issues intersect—race, gender, environment, socioeconomic status, sexuality, religious identity..... Recognizing all of these in our neighbor and working for fullness of life in all these. How may we make more of those connections?

We are yoked to loving neighbor.

And we are yoked to loving ourselves. To love yourself does not mean to love yourself into a consumerist cocoon that isolates you from the world's great griefs.... Loving yourself is not about believing the lies told to sell you more of what will never be enough.....

And loving yourself doesn't mean loving yourself for being part of a privileged race, or being born to a certain status.

Yesterday I went to Charlottesville for part of justice and witness actions in response to the KKK's promise to hold a rally in a park there. There Margaret, Louise, and I joined hundreds of others in singing songs like "This Little Light of Mine" and "We Shall Overcome," in blowing bubbles and making peace cranes and in holding up signs lifting Scripture verses of love. We then sat among a diverse crowd in listening to an NAACP program and panel on justice actions that we can take. The event ended with all of us holding hands and singing "Lift Every Voice..."

I think forgetting that our identity as beloved child of God is what drives people to cling to false gods like white supremacy.

To love yourself as a beloved child of God is to understand that everyone else is given that name too. It is claiming that identity above any other and pointing your life to it.

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest, writer, and professor, wrote, "Over the years, I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection.... As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, [I feel I] deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned. Self-

rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved." Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence."

Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence.

May we love ourselves enough to forgive ourselves for whatever keeps us from that fullness....

May we love ourselves enough to name the false prophets that sneak in and try to make us reject the love we were born already having.

May we love ourselves enough to risk recovery from whatever it is that's getting in the way....

May we love ourselves enough to break the rules that others gave us and that never belonged to us or to our God.

We are yoked to loving ourselves....

And we are yoked to loving God....

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "A religious [person] is one who holds God and [humanity] in a single thought at one time, at all times, who suffers harm done to others, whose greatest passion is compassion, whose greatest strength is love and defiance of despair."

We hear in his words that to love God is to be compassionately present with each other....

To know that your being there is enough of a harbor for the one who needs a place to rest.

To love God is to love the silence of God, to love the pause in a moment where nothing can answer or needs to....

To love God is to love the noise of God, to love the sound of the chorus of children in their jubilation, or the sound of a bluebird naming her place in the world....

To love God is to love the twelve year old Palestinian boy who is taken from his bed in the middle of the night, with his hands bound, removed from his family, taken into detention for an unknown time for throwing one small rock....

And it is to love the Israeli mother who fears for her soldier son, and wakes up every day praying for an end to occupation.

To love God is to love the dreaming of God, that is to say to dream of a place where the ripe fruit of justice is full on trees, and feeds all of us so extravagantly that we have it on our fingers and faces....

To love God is to love the heartache of God, the way that we cannot stand next to someone we love who is in pain without feeling it ourselves.... And that we just hold the press of it together.

At the beginning of this sermon, I told you about my friend Sarah and her passing. Just a few days ago, her daughter Mona wrote a speech entitled "peace" directed to kids her age. She writes in it,

"For some things, there is no right or wrong way to do them.... What about living? There are wrong ways to do it. Hatred. Greed. Unhappiness. But YOU can stop it. You can help the world. Bring unity, love, kindness. You are alive because God wanted you to be. Your life has a purpose. That purpose is to make the world a better place. So all you kids out there, you could grow up to change the world. So try to, ok? Thanks. Thanks so much. Thanks, like a million times."

And all of us, whatever our age, can grow up to this....

Love neighbor. Love yourself. Love God.

Thanks, like a million times.

Amen.

Benediction:

The yoke is not easy.... it is lovingkindness.

So take it upon yourselves and love neighbor. Love yourself. Love God.