

“The Yoke of Jesus and Rest”

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

July 6th, 2014

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Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

Our United Methodist churches and pastors use a different calendar than other churches. As of July 1, all of our churches receive new pastors and actually today is the first Sunday of my new year's appointment back to Fair Oaks church. Appointments were confirmed by our Bishop at the annual conference and I was reappointed to serve our church. On your behalf, Bill and Ruby were there and blessed my new appointment. Thank you. So, I am very excited and feel anew today. Most of all, I thank God that I don't have to worry about moving in the midst of a new baby's arrival. I am also very grateful to our church and Bishop for this honor and privilege to continue to serve you as your pastor. It is a time for a new beginning.

For the next four Sundays, I am going to talk about the Wesleyan way-back to the root of our Methodism and spirit of renewal in Jesus' teachings. It will be a time to refresh us as followers of Christ. Jesus Christ really matters in our faith. How much do we know about Jesus? Even though we believe in Christ Jesus, we may have different perspectives and images of Jesus in our diverse understandings. It is okay to be different, but we want to be serious about Jesus' teachings and his messages in the Bible. This morning, I invite you all to encounter Jesus and understand his teachings to open our eyes and deepen our faith. Hopefully we are able to find a new spiritual a-ha moment and meet our new Messiah Christ Jesus today. What really did Jesus mean to teach us? Let's revisit our story again.

In verse 28-30, Jesus comforts us in saying, “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.” Two specific words captured my heart while I was pondering and contemplating Jesus' words: Yoke and Rest. What did He really mean by that? The yoke is obviously a symbol of our burdens. What are our burdens? These can be our life matters like many bills, unemployment or threats of illness and death, struggles in parenting and challenges in relationships with others or maybe personal issues like inadequate feelings about ourselves. On a daily basis, we face

handling heavy burdens that weigh us down. Jesus knows our struggles and calls us to come to Him. He promises rest. But we have to be careful to understand Jesus' invitation. Jesus didn't promise to resolve our problems nor find us a job. Jesus is not a life consultant, medical doctor, nor a job agent. We may continue to struggle with our life challenges and they may not stop to bother us even though we come before Jesus. Even challenges may get worse. What Jesus means by rest is inviting us to be a new being, to create a new reality and to have a new power of transforming life in Christ. It is more complex than our likings. Jesus here is more interested in questions of religiosity among Jewish intellectuals and religious leaders. They were not flexible in interpreting the laws.

Let's discuss the concept of the Yoke. The yoke usually was made from a circular wooden halter which was placed on an animal's neck, and harnessed to a plow, cart, or other vehicle. The yoke in the Jewish culture has important meanings. It was a symbol of service and servitude in the Bible or sometimes it described the burden of slavery or taxes upon the people. But basically, in Jewish rabbis' tradition, the yoke is a metaphor of dedication to the service of God, called "The yoke of Torah, the law of Moses". In our Scripture readings, Jesus questions the legalism of the Pharisees, because people were tired. Jesus talks about Rest. Jesus emphasizes love that goes beyond legalism. He wants to liberate us from legalism by the power of love. This is all about Jesus' ministry. Jesus invites us to join Him in this new renewal spirit. This explains his quote, "Come to me and I will give you rest."

In our United Methodist Churches, we are all still struggling with the matters and haven't found our way between love and law. I am talking about the Homosexuality issue. Recently, Rev. Frank Schaefer, who was defrocked because he presided at the wedding of his gay son has been reinstated and received his clergy credentials back. Our sister church, Presbyterian Church in USA at their general assembly this year has approved a new recommendation to change language to indicate that "marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman." Our Annual Conference approved a new resolution that we won't discriminate against gay or lesbian ordination candidates. But our denomination stance on same sex relationships as stated in the book of Discipline defines marriage as between a man and a woman, declares homosexuality as incompatible with Christian teaching and forbids clergy members to officiate same sex weddings. The New York Times (June 24, 2014) reported that "The religious world is deeply divided over

whether and how to recognize same-sex relationships, and whether to ordain noncelibate gay men and lesbians as clergy members. Liberal Christian and Jewish denominations have become increasingly supportive of gay men and lesbians and their relationships, while more conservative denominations have held to traditional teachings about sexuality and marriage.”

What if Jesus were here with us, how would he advise us? Better we stick to “the Yoke of Torah” or “is it time to break the Yoke”? I am not going to ask you to choose any side this morning, but I would like to challenge you to discern Jesus’ message. For in Him, the new being is present in such a way that it determines His life. We are disciples of Jesus Christ which means we follow Jesus’ way. The essence of Jesus’ ministry and movement is the spirit of renewal not by law but by love. Our next general conference in 2016 may not decide to change our stance on this issue, but we should not give up our Jesus’ renewal spirit. Basically, I am not talking about only human sexuality issue, but I am talking about how we can go beyond our religion and legalism thoughts. How can we boldly cast away the yoke?

Jesus invites us saying, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” The Message, a paraphrased Bible, gives us an easier explanation. It says, “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll receive your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me.” This is exactly what Jesus challenges us and the Wesleyan way that we want to follow. Jesus will show us to take a real rest. Let us follow Him, walk with Him and work with Him for transformation of ourselves first and for the transformation of the world next. Amen.