July 13, 2008  
Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Romans 7:15-25  
Matthew 11:16-19,25-30  
Third in a Series: Discipleship 101  
A Contradiction in Terms  

*My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*  
Matthew 11:30

*In your mercy, O Lord our God, tell us what you are to us. Say to our spirits, ‘I am your salvation.’ Speak that we may hear you. The ears of our hearts are turned to you, Lord; open them and say to our spirits, ‘I am your salvation.’*  -- St. Augustine

Everybody knows what an oxymoron is, right? It’s a contradiction in terms, like Tennyson’s King whose “faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.”ii Two mortgage brokers named Adrian Skiles and John Shore recently won the Comedy Zone Bronze Award for their list of the Best Oxymorons in the English languageii, things we hear and say all the time, things like:

- Cheap gas
- Pretty ugly
- Half dead
- Microsoft works
- Hopelessly optimistic
- God awful
- Young Floridians

And here’s my personal favorite:

*Affordable housing*

And there are about 300 or 400 more. With the real estate market this slow you can either laugh or cry, and laughing is better. So they put together an enormous list of funny contradictory things we say all the time without really thinking about them.

Easy Yoke? Light Burden? I get the sense that Jesus knew exactly what he was saying. He was making a joke. In fact, Jesus was a very funny guy, a comedian sometimes. (Yes, choir, it’s true. Some of Jesus’ jokes were better than Jack Levick’s --okay, a lot better than Jack Levick’s.) Some of Jesus’ humor gets lost in translation, but some of it shines through.
There’s really no such thing as light burden. That’s why it’s called a burden; it’s heavy. And easy yoke? Have you ever tried to lift a farmer’s yoke?

It’s meant to be funny, but his humor is bittersweet. The Galilean mission has not been going well; there is serious opposition. Everywhere he goes someone is there to take him to task, to challenge or criticize him. The same people who blast John the Baptist for being too strict turn around and label Jesus a slacker. It seems that they would rather taunt and trouble him than follow him.

All this is particularly difficult because only a few months earlier huge crowds had followed him everywhere. They hung on his every word. They’d been all smiles and encouragement then. But as soon as he asked them for something, when he asked them to come and follow him, to put him at the center place in their lives, to place allegiance to him above everything – above personal desires and ambitions, above love of family and country, when he asked them to take up a cross and follow him, things turned ugly. A lot of people simply disappeared; others began to plot ways to get rid of him.

Most of the time Jesus accepts all this childishness and jealousy for what it is. Other times he’s furious. There’s a section here in Matthew 11:20-24 in between the readings for today that the lectionary leaves out. Jesus is mad as fire. Apparently the people who put the lectionary together didn’t want to us to see the tired and angry and discouraged Jesus, cursing some cities in Galilee where he’d gone to preach and to call people to repent and follow. They didn’t. They’d refused; they didn’t need Jesus, these proud, affluent and artistic people had no need of him.

When we pick back up in verse 25 he’s gathered his composure, he prays, and opens his message with a joke and a promise.

The promise is beautiful, comforting, soothing invitation, reminiscent of Wisdom’s call in the 8th chapter of Proverbs. Of all earth’s children, Jesus knew weariness, trouble and failure. He knew what it was like to bear a heavy burden, and to need rest. He said:

*Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*

Maybe you know the name Noah Brooks. Rich Brooks, the wonderful, courageous columnist and former bureau chief for the Herald-Tribune has a son named Noah who
was a classmate of our daughter’s. I love to tease Noah about his namesake. The original Noah Brooks was a journalist, and a close advisor to President Lincoln.

In 1863 when the Civil War was raging and the end was nowhere in sight. Lincoln was out for a ride with Noah Brooks. Noticing the president’s obvious fatigue, Brooks suggested that he take a brief rest when they got back to the White House.

Lincoln shook his head, “I don’t know about rest.” He said, “I suppose it’s good for the body, but the tired part of me is inside and out of reach.”

Do you know what that’s like? Me too. There is so much in us that is restless. We strain under the burdens of illnesses and family needs, another long and divisive war and an economy that is making it increasingly hard for us simply to feed our families. Many of the members of our congregation are carrying the heavy load of job loss, bills they can’t pay, and the fear that the worst is not over yet.

Jesus’ promise feels like a soothing balm. It comes without naiveté. He speaks as one who has known the backside of life’s hand. His promise of hope comes when we need it most. I love what Barbara Brown Taylor said about these verses in this little book called *Seeds of Heaven,*

> This is a wonderful promise, a comforting promise to which many of us turn when our burdens seem impossible to bear, when our best effort to cope with them have failed and we are close to collapse. It is a promise that offers hope of help, hope of a God who will lift the sweaty loads off our backs and replace them with a lighter yoke, lighter because it yokes us with one who is greater than we are, and with whose strong help we can bear any burden.

We can because he can. Yoked to Christ our load is no lighter, but it seems to be because his strength is greater than we can ever ask or imagine. He offers us freedom from even the heaviest burden. I know it’s true, I’ve experienced that kind of help in my own life. I know that you have too, because you tell me about the ways that he’s made it possible for you to find freedom from terrible burdens you’ve had to carry, through “humble reliance upon divine grace.”

In the film called *The Mission,* a film I highly recommend, Robert De Niro plays a man named Rodrigo Mendoza who has led a selfish and cruel life. After killing the brother he loved he wants to die himself, instead he ends up joining a Catholic order on a mission to a remote tribe in South America. As penance for the things that he has done Mendoza carries a heavy weight attached to his body, an enormous ball and chain kind of burden that hangs around his neck taxing his physical strength and keeping him constantly struggling for his balance.
[Then something amazing happens. New Song: show clip]

There is a scene in which the mission team is climbing up a steep cliff in a remote and beautiful rainforest. Struggling with this awful burden he stumbles, nearly sending the entire party off the cliff and onto the rocks below. Finally when he falls exhausted, it becomes clear that the burden of his failure will not only kill Mendoza but the missionaries as well.

Then suddenly, one of the tribesmen flashes a huge knife, and Mendoza believes he’s about to die. In a way he’s relieved. He hangs his head in resignation. The tribesman reaches behind him slashes through the rope from around Mendoza’s neck. The burden falls away and disappears down cliff and into the sea.

At first you wonder how Mendoza will react. He has insisted on carrying this burden. Very soon this crude and rough hewn man is sobbing in relief and joy, laughing out loud as he realizes that his guilt is finally gone -- it has been removed, his burden is cast into the sea. He is free of the wrenched man that he was. He will never carry that burden again. v

That is the hilarious and wonderful thing about God’s grace. Those willing to take Jesus’ yoke allow him to take the burden of our guilt and destroy it – forever.

They say that in the redeeming work of Jesus, God played a huge, cosmic joke on the powers of sin and evil. Evil thought it had us in its grip. With one giant – gotcha – one cross and empty tomb, God settled that forever.

He meant it as a joke, a play on words, an oxymoron. And it is the truest word ever spoken. There’s no such thing as an easy yoke or a light burden – except with him. In Jesus even the world’s most outrageous impossibilities are possible and in him, we are free!

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1 Alfred Lord Tennyson, Elaine: An Idyl of the King (Brownell, 2007) 49.