

**“Upon Our Shoulders”**  
**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**  
**July 6, 2008**  
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Today’s lesson, from the gospel of Matthew, concludes with what has been seen as one of the great feel good moments of the Bible. Here Jesus invites people to follow him and experience a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light. Through this image Jesus is contrasting a life of following him with what the Jewish people had known as the joyous, but difficult, burden of following ancient Jewish structures and laws—a path that was described metaphorically by Jewish rabbis as the “yoke of the Torah.”<sup>1</sup> And, if one were to believe how this passage ends, it would seem that what Jesus is promising is a life of ease.

And that is what I find interesting about how this passage is read amid and repeated within Christianity, because if we are to truly look into this passage and also keep in mind everything else that we know about Christ’s journey, we would know that if there is one thing that Jesus would never do it is to promise life lived from a recliner. So what is going on here? In order to fully understand what Jesus is promising through the image of the yoke, we must first hear the words that open this lesson. For before Jesus makes any promises, we witness him chastising those who have heard his preaching and that of John the Baptist for their failure to understand the messages they bring. Jesus suggests that he and John have been ignored and in his imagery he recounts that John’s voice wailed of one who would come with fire and judgment—but he was widely derided. And Jesus, too, was derided and ignored when he turned water into wine at the wedding feast and when he chose to surround himself with tax collectors, prostitutes and other outcasts. No matter how they presented the call, John and Jesus were ignored, as if they were little children, confined by their status, and left where they might have been seen but, clearly, not heard. And thus, instead of heading their warnings or understanding the call that Jesus had been offering people have placed John and Jesus in the category of one who is possessed or merely a drunk. And once they have been placed in these categories all that remains is to ignore them completely, for what they say has no value or meaning.

In the intervening passage, Jesus speaks of the woes that have fallen upon Galilean cities, and he uses the example of these cities to announce what will become of those who refuse to follow him. Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum find themselves singled out and chastised for their refusal to repent when much of his ministry had happened in their presence—and once again we find a rebuke for a lack of hospitality—this time for those who have been less than hospitable to the message Jesus is bringing. In this intervening passage Jesus notes, “*For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.*”<sup>24</sup> *But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.*” This is clearly a rebuke of those who refuse to welcome Jesus—not solely into their homes, but into their head and heart—even after they have witnessed his ministry. And all of this serves as the context for Jesus to offer his invitation to a load that is lighter.

When I first read this passage and began working with the image of the yoke of Christ that wrests upon our shoulders I found myself thinking back to one of the great tropes of literature, film, and television: the angel and devil figures wresting upon the shoulders of the protagonist.

Whether it be Christopher Marlow's Dr. Faustus wrestling with good and bad angels, Disney's Pinocchio balancing his own naiveté against Jimminy Cricket's wisdom (have you ever noticed that Jimminy Cricket's initials are J.C.?), or Darrin from *Be-witched* (both the first and second Darrins for those of you keeping track at home) being confounded by Samantha on one side and his mother-in-law on the other shoulder—all of these images reminded me of the yoke of responsibility that Jesus promises will be easier to bear through him. Perhaps the devil and angel characters remind me of a yoke because within popular culture they have become an easy way to highlight the struggle that I believe we all feel between doing what is right and doing that which is expedient, convenient, or just plain easy. This uneasy tension is what makes the yoke of responsibility so difficult to bear for, I believe, we find ourselves deeply desirous of that which is just and whole and godly. Isn't that, after all, what we want for our world? But I submit that I, and we together, are all too often willing instead to accept those policies that don't hurt us, willing to sanction behaviors which leave us protected even when others aren't, willing to use access that is made easy because of the demographic categories that we happen to fit—even when others still find themselves on the outside looking in. The surprisingly heavy yoke we bear is filled with moral ambiguity and faithful questions that we would just as soon not be forced to deal with. As I think about it, I must admit that perhaps I have too often heard only one of those folks sitting upon my shoulder and, thus, my yoke seems a little bit unbalanced and a little bit too easy to bear. Surely this isn't what Jesus meant, is it?

Another of the issues that comes out of this passage for me is the completely inadequate way that we are able to understand what it might mean for a yoke to be easy. While drawing upon the image of the good and bad angels sitting on the shoulder might describe the moral dilemmas that many of us face in our lives, it does not do justice to the truth of the image in ancient days. For during biblical times (and in many places even today), a yoke was used as a basic tool for bringing water to the home or village. Buckets would be balanced on each side of the yoke and, after walking to the well, stream, or river, the person charged with collecting water would bear the weight of the water upon their shoulders as they walked back to their own home carrying that which would quite literally give life—water. I am not sure that when we live in a place and time where water is available at the turn of the faucet that we can quite comprehend the importance of the statement that Jesus is making. Jesus is offering a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light; and for those who have been traveling a mile or more only to then load water upon their shoulders for the return trip, an easy yoke is without a doubt a powerful image. The stoles that are conferred upon clergy at ordination are meant to symbolically remind us of the yoke of ministry that we take upon our shoulders. While I love the imagery, it does not quite compare to the physical demands of carrying water from a great distance. I can only imagine those ancient people pining for a quilted stole as they walk down the road with the water sloshing about...

Finally, as I wrestle with the image of a yoke made easier through Jesus I find myself comparing this image with another that comes a bit earlier in Matthew when Jesus notes that, "Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me." Part of me wants to ask Jesus, "So which is it? Do we need to pick up our cross and understand its weight or do we need to follow you so that our load can be made lighter? What exactly do you expect from us? And the truth, of course, is that it is not an either/or proposition. Rather than existing in a black/white dichotomy Jesus exists in the realm of the "both/and." That is, following Jesus does not mean only that we will be burdened with the weight of the cross, but it also does not mean

that we are set for a “lazy-boy” lifestyle either. Following Jesus means we have to experience it all: we have to become acquainted with the weight and burden of the cross so that we can more fully experience the moments of weightlessness that Jesus promises. This is the astronaut passage: When astronauts train to go into space they fly on a plane that is able to simulate weightlessness if only in short bursts. And this is what I think Jesus is describing when he promises an easy yoke: that for short bursts of time—perhaps when we are most in need—our yoke will be made lighter. But even then we still wear the yoke, we are still responsible for bringing the water of life to one another, we are still responsible for promoting justice, for feeding and clothing one another, for being Christ in the midst of our contemporary struggles and madness. The theologian Sarah Dylan Breuer describes the journey this way: “We bear the Cross not as one person alone, but with the whole Body of Christ, and Christ's presence with us brings strength, courage, and peace. When we confess (that’s right confess!) Jesus as the way, we are not only joining the triumphant and true king, we are also joining with the poor, marginalized, and oppressed to become what [Desmond Tutu](#) calls "the winning side" as we leave behind our individual cares and needs and become a part of the citizenry of God's peaceable and just kingdom. When we allow Jesus to be the one who shares the burden that is upon our collective shoulders we then are becoming that which Zechariah preached about: we are becoming "prisoners of hope"<sup>2</sup> (Zechariah 9:12), of a hope that is based in loving God and loving one another. And with that, there is truly nothing else; there is certainly no easy chair, but there is community, there is grace, there is abundant life, and it is there for us—together and as one—as we follow Jesus.

Thanks be to God! Amen!

<sup>1</sup> <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/apr14m.shtml>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/06/proper\\_9\\_year\\_a.html](http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/06/proper_9_year_a.html)

... until, that is, Jesus intervened. And that's the source of our hope too. One reason it's true that Jesus' burden is light is that it's light in comparison to the other burdens that fall on the shoulders of people who think they're going to be unencumbered. If we're not intentional about seeking the God of Israel as incarnated in Jesus, then our culture is only too happy to slip its own burdens on our shoulders -- all the pressure and anxiety of a life based around achievement and conformity to cultural ideals, an inheritance for our children that they start experiencing as their own as soon as they learn to read the worry on our faces. If that's the best someone is offering me, I think I'll go with whatever's behind door number two.

But more importantly, and most compellingly, we can say that Jesus' burden is easy and his yoke is light because it is. That I can opt out of the burdens my culture wants to place on me raises my hope that I might be able to opt in to something better, and the Good News is that the best option -- abundant, joyful life, freedom from anxiety, and real, deep, big-enough-for-the-world love is available to us in Christ Jesus. We bear the Cross not as one person alone, but with the whole Body of Christ, and Christ's presence with us brings strength, courage, and peace. When we confess Jesus as Lord, we are not only joining the triumphant and true king (or, as [Desmond Tutu](#) puts it, "the winning side," as God calls the poor and marginalized); we are becoming citizens of God's peaceable and just kingdom, "prisoners of hope" (Zechariah 9:12) even as we

bear the Cross, restored and freed for eternal and abundant life in service and community with all whom God loves. Source: [www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/06/proper\\_9\\_year\\_a.html](http://www.sarahlaughed.net/lectionary/2005/06/proper_9_year_a.html)