

Sermon: What Are You Yoked To?

Year A, Proper 9

[Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45:10-17; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30](#)

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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

I am a New England Yankee. I come from a long line of people who throw nothing away. My family still has the receipt for moving the homestead from one location to another in Exeter, in the very early spring when the ground was still frozen and no one needed the 18 yoke of oxen to do the plowing. This was before electricity and telephone wires were everywhere. So they just jacked the house up and, putting down rollers, moved it from one side of town to the other.

You guys know what a yoke looks like, right? Draw it in the air with your fingers. Right, two loops where the oxen's heads go that are pinned in place to a crossbar. You think of them as being made of wood, right? So we're on the same page. How does it work? Think about it for a minute. The yoke transfers the load to the oxen's shoulders efficiently, both in the sense that a minimum of the oxen's power is lost and in the sense that they are not rubbed raw and unable to work.

Oxen are very powerful with enormous endurance. If you need to do something that requires a lot of force for a long time and you don't have a mechanical engine, oxen are the ideal creatures for the job. Having two work together gives you a significant increase in efficiency that outpaces the increase in cost. So a yoke helps oxen get the job done.

Yokes are made out of wood, so they're made by carpenters. Carpenters would shape yokes very roughly, then fit them for the particular oxen who would use it.¹ As the oxen grew and aged, the cross bar piece would pretty much remain the same, but the U shaped piece had to change in order to keep the force being transferred to their shoulders comfortably. Indeed, the word that's translated "easy" in "my yoke is easy" can also be translated "well fitting."²

OK, enough with the setup. You knew I wasn't going to talk about yokes as agricultural implements for the whole sermon. If for no other reason than that Jesus, a carpenter who had doubtless made plenty of yokes in his time, knew how powerful an image they were.

So what are the big jobs that take a lot of endurance in your life? A mortgage, a car loan, student debt, saving for retirement? Are you eating well balanced, locally sourced, environmentally friendly meals with healthy snacks in between? Exercising enough, with the right balance of cardio, strength and flexibility training?

The tool that transfers our strength and power to accomplishing those jobs is usually money. Money is what keeps us and our mortgages connected. Well balanced meals, let alone ones which are locally sourced, tend to be more expensive, so money makes a difference in our diets. Money gets us the membership at a pleasant or convenient gym so our fitness goals remain achievable.

We don't talk about money in church very often. Maybe because it doesn't serve the same purpose. It doesn't help us work on jobs that require a lot of power for a long time, like our mortgages or getting good quality meals on the table or pounding on the treadmill, day after day.

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Vol. 2. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 17.

² Barclay, 17.

We don't get more God if we put more in the plate. We don't get less New Beginnings if we put less in the plate. It makes sense that we don't talk much about money in church, because that's not what we hand over in church.

If you are here on a lovely July morning, you have already chosen to hand your life over to Jesus. (Matthew 11:27) Handing your life over to Jesus is hard work that requires endurance. As a church we have become convinced that we have something really special to share with our community. This Fourth of July was very different for me. Instead of seeing all the folks lining the street as people who were going to reject my invitation, I saw a sea of faces who didn't yet realize how lucky they were to have such a wonderful church in their midst. And I wasn't the only one there reaching out. Kevin and Bob were there in the church, ready to share as much about the architecture of the building as we could. There was one lady there who asked about coming to the church and I pointed Jill out to her. But I should have just introduced them to each other, mom to mom. We'll all get better at sharing our invitation.

There are groups who are working over the summer to get us ready to be even more inviting in the fall. If we want to say to someone, "I'd like to invite you to my church. I think you'd really like it." we have to know something about them (why would *they* like it?) and we have to know something about the church (what is it about the church that they would like?). We are being transformed by this vision. This July 4th was noticeably different for me because of it.

If money is not meant to be the yoke that keeps us connected with the hard work of handing our lives over to Jesus, then what is? I think that is different for all of us at different times. This week it showed up as cool water on a hot July day. It was being one of half a dozen people there at midnight to make sure the bell rang out safely to mark our own Brexit all those years ago. It is knowing that New Beginnings will sing next week and we will be broken open to God again. It is the traditions of our families. It is the values they have instilled in us and the commitments they made generations ago to bring forth God's kingdom in this world and to which we are still committed. Whatever it is, it looks and feels a lot like love. We hand our lives over to Jesus using a yoke of love.

So does money and the discussion of money have no place in church? I think it does. Each Sunday we have this time of quiet and singing and care for each other and then we go back into the world. We go into the world that complains when they play the flute and we don't dance (Matthew 11:17). We go into the world that complains that one prophet was too much of a buzz kill and that the son of God was too much of a hedonist. We go into the world that claims to want moderation but will settle for mediocrity.³

But we go out into that world transformed. Not just by what happens during one hour on Sunday morning, however refreshing that is. We are transformed the rest of the week too. We see people differently because we have met Jesus Christ, because we have handed our lives over to him and to God. The love is there all week. It's just that most of the way we go out into the world the rest of the week is with money.

If we are being transformed by handing our lives over to Jesus, why do we think our relationship with money isn't being transformed? All of it is, when we're paying our mortgage, or buying

³ William Goettler, "Proper 9, Homiletical Perspective, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 215.

our groceries, or at the gym. What would change if we really paid attention to what we spend our money on in light of the transformation God is bringing into our lives? How much of what we spend it on is revealing who we are to God in a way we're ok with? How much of what we spend it on allows God to be revealed to us? The money we spend can work with the love Christ creates in us. Or it can work against it. It can make our efforts to walk with Jesus more efficient or it can pull us off track or even backwards. Each one of us has enormous strength and endurance, even if it doesn't always feel that way. By handing ourselves over to Jesus, the most important work we are engaged in is bringing forth the kingdom of God. Through our worship, through our volunteering, through our mortgages, through our meals, through our exercise, through our lives. Love makes that more efficient. And so does money.

Notice what Jesus is promising us. It is *his* yoke. *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me* (Matthew 11:29). We are pulling and learning with him.⁴ We use love to hand our lives over to Jesus. The work requires enormous power and endurance. And we stumble and fall, and follow our money well away from the real task we're supposed to be working on. But we are bound to one so powerful, so enduring, so loving, that we are brought back to the work of the Kingdom time and again. When we let it, our yoke is easy and our burden is light (Matthew 11:30).

⁴ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 129.