

**The Rev. Bob Honeychurch**  
**Proper 9 Year A**  
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Two weeks ago now, I wasn't in church on Sunday, because about six months ago, Sylvia and I had been contacted by some long-ago parishioners from our Montana days back in the 1980's and early 90's. The last time I saw Holly was 16 years ago now, when she was a cute, cherub-faced little kid of 7 or 8. She and her family had been parishioners in our small congregation in Libby, Montana, and Sylvia and her mother were also co-workers... Sylvia the director, and Carol Ann the nurse practitioner, at the county-run Family Planning Clinic. Holly's dad had died when she was only 4 or 5, of complications from his diabetes, and so, for all of the subsequent years, the two of them – Carol Ann and Holly – were a family. Some years after we left Libby, Carol Ann went off to seminary, and became a priest. Holly – now a 23 year old young woman – was planning to get married. And since she wanted her mom to serve in the capacity of “mother of the bride”, they wondered who they might ask to officiate at Holly's marriage. We were honored that, after all these years, Holly's fondest memories were of her days at St. Luke's in Libby, and so she asked if Sylvia or I could perform the service. And so, I was the one fortunate enough to get to go to the small town of Mitchell, Nebraska... in far western Nebraska – just a few miles from the Wyoming border – for Holly and Matt's wedding.

Now, the groom's family is all from Atlanta, Georgia, so Holly and Matt wanted to give them all a real experience of life in the west. So our rehearsal dinner the night before the wedding was held about 20 miles from town at an old-fashioned chuck wagon dinner site, where our meal consisted of steaks the size of dinner plates cooked over an open fire, beans and potatoes, and home made ice cream for dessert. Before the meal there were even wagon rides out onto the prairie, where you could still see the faint tracks of the Oregon Trail still visible in the ground, where, 150 years ago now, early settlers trekked west through Nebraska to places like Oregon, and California, and Idaho.

Our wagon, which seated about 15 or 20 people, was pulled by two large horses, yoked together, who effortlessly navigated us through the waist-high grass, as the wagon master regaled us with stories about life in the Old West. But no matter how entertaining the driver and his tales might have been, what really caught my attention was watching these two horses working together to share the load, to share the task, to share the burden of transporting those 15 or 20 people on a 30-minute excursion through history. Whenever one horse would stumble and lose its footing, or get distracted and start to wander off to one side or the other, or move either too fast or too slow to suit the driver's wishes, the other horse would pick up the slack, and – because they were linked together – the wagon ride went along flawlessly. The work for those horses that evening wasn't easy... but because there were two of them working side-by-side, they were able to accomplish far more together than either of them could have done individually.

My thoughts went back to that wagon ride as I read this morning's gospel lesson. And I was reminded of a brutal reality about the world in which we live today. All of the technological advances of the past 150 years since the days of the Oregon Trail have forever changed the way we live our lives. From medicine, to science and engineering, to communications and transportation, our understanding of the ways of the world has been transformed so much that a

person living back then would probably not even be able to comprehend the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But all of that progress has not come without a cost. For in adopting a new worldview, we have surrendered another way to grasp reality around us. And especially for those suburbanites like ourselves, living here in the Silicon Valley, perhaps the greatest loss has been an understanding of our connection to the land and our agrarian roots... which is unfortunate, since that is the world and language of Jesus, and so much of what he says finds its origins in our agricultural heritage. And so, every time Jesus puts on his farmer's hat and starts talking about drawing our life from the land, all many of us hear is quaint imagery which has about as much connection to our lives a painting by Grandma Moses or a lithograph by Currier & Ives.

For some of us, the words practically roll off our tongues, since we've heard them in church for so many years. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens – or, in the language of the King James Bible, Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden – and I will give you rest." That's the part that so many of us like. But then comes the part which, for most of us, really doesn't make a whole lot of sense. Jesus goes on to say: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

The difficulty, of course, with those particular words of Jesus is that they seem to contradict our own lived experience. Even if we are able to get our heads around the notion of being strapped to a yoke, it doesn't seem like that's going to make our lives any easier. At the same time that we hear Jesus telling us that his yoke is easy and his burden is light, we get the message that being a Christian is hard work... that it takes sacrifice, and commitment, and effort to do the difficult work of bearing the cross of Christ.

So which is it? Is the task of being a Christian difficult work or is it easy? I think the best answer is: "Yes." There's no getting around the fact that the Christian path is often a perilous one. We live at a time, and in a culture where choosing to follow the precepts of Jesus Christ will often put us at odds with the cultural values of those around us. How do we reconcile Jesus' command to "*Love your enemies*" with the countless thousands of people killed by American bombs and guns in Iraq and Afghanistan? Where does "*Sell all you have and give it to the poor*" fit in to our consumer-crazed culture which entices us to buy more and more stuff... whether we need it or not? How does "*Whoever does it unto one of the least of these, my brothers and sisters, does it to me*" become reconciled to the widening gap between rich and poor, or the reduction in funding for health care or education or job training for our most destitute citizens, or our inequitable tax system the gives multi-millionaires the greatest tax breaks and places the greatest burden on lower- and middle-income Americans? Indeed... if we take it seriously, being a Christian is mighty difficult work.

And at the same time, my mind is drawn back to those two horses making their way across the Nebraska grassland. They were able to do everything they did because they were partnered together. When I hear Jesus saying, "Take my yoke upon you," I hear that as an invitation... an invitation to take one half of the yoke, while Jesus takes the other half, knowing that when I stumble, Jesus will be there to keep us moving forward ... an invitation to be yoked and partnered with the one who, in the words of St. Paul, "did not count equality with God a

thing to be grasped, but humbled himself, taking the form of a servant” ... an invitation to share with Jesus in the transformation of all creation... an invitation to find my rightful place alongside the incarnate God, shoulder to shoulder, doing the life-changing work of ushering in the kingdom of God. That, my friends, is exciting work. And what makes that yoke easy, and that burden light, is the knowledge that I never would be able to do any of that if I were trying to accomplish it all on my own.

We celebrate this weekend Independence Day, which to me is a bit ironic. Because now, more than ever, we need to be reminded that we are dependent upon God... and that God is dependent upon us... and that we are dependent upon one another... to fulfill and complete the work that God has set before us. It is whole and holy work which we do. And it is work which we can never do alone. So, despite the fireworks and the festivities, despite the patriotic speeches and the stirring melodies, despite all of the messages extolling the virtues of independence... despite all that, take a few moments to find a quiet place deep in your heart, and give thanks for the absolute and utter dependence which defines our relationship as Christians to God and to one another. We are not alone. We are never alone. For we are bound together one to another. “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Amen.