“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.”

Good morning, friends! Thanks be to God for the blessing of gathering today in person for worship. I am thrilled that we have come together here in God’s presence, to offer prayer and praise, to break open Holy Scripture, to be fed, nourished and sustained by the living Christ who comes to us in the Holy Eucharist.

We all have stories to tell, don’t we, about what the past four months have been like for us. Thrust into an utterly foreign place, feeling as if we have little or no control. The days have been filled with all manner of unpleasantness – sickness, death, physical distancing, disappointment, sadness, grief, loss, anxiety, restlessness, financial worry, trying new things we’ve never done before. With the psalmist, I’ve had moments of crying out, “How long, O Lord?” I have missed spending time with people precious to me – you dear ones, family, friends. For some, life milestones, celebrations, partings and farewells have been postponed or canceled because of COVID-19.

And yet . . . and yet from behind dark clouds there have been unexpected, once taken for granted signs of goodness. I’ve had to limit my news and social media consumption in order to see the goodness. I have to listen carefully to the direction of people I believe to be knowledgeable and trustworthy. I’ve been invited to practice stillness to be reminded that God is God. I try to be faithful in continually offering my individual prayers and also in praying virtually with others. I have benefitted from getting outdoors for exercise, fresh air, and big doses of nature – especially attending to lovelier birdsong than I ever remember hearing. There are in this world many gifts: beauty, kindness, self-sacrifice, truth, perseverance, cooperation, humor, loving our neighbor as ourselves. And especially wisdom – learning to find the sources of wisdom - has been crucial in these difficult days.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Though I have wanted to listen to Jesus’ words, it has been difficult to let this clear invitation of the Lord resonate deep down in my soul. On the one hand, Jesus’ words are full of comfort and promise. On the other hand, we cannot escape the human utterances of loneliness, lament, and loss all around us. Jesus’ hope, and the deep mourning of the effects of the pandemic and the social systemic sins it has brought clearly to light – there’s tension here between the hope, the joy and the pain interwoven in our lives.
“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.”

Most of us have had little experience with a yoke, maybe never even seen one. It’s basically an agricultural tool. Most often, a yoke was a harness fitted on the neck of oxen or donkey to bind them to the traces, to keep them on the path for drawing a plow and turning over the ground. A yoke eased the animal’s work of hauling a load. It was made of wood, hand carved to fit the neck and shoulders of the animal to prevent pain or discomfort. In ancient culture, the word yoke was a term that was used to describe submission. When someone was described as being yoked to someone or something, it implied that he or she was in submission to that person or thing.

The willful part of me resists the idea of being yoked to something or someone. But isn’t everyone yoked to someone or something? The question is to whom or what do we want to be yoked? Some are yoked to the power of sin. They are under its control. Some are yoked in a relationship of bondage with forces that oppose God. Some are bound to fear, selfishness, or greed. And some are yoked to Jesus as their Lord, listening to and serving others in his name and spirit.

Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” But why wouldn’t we just avoid yokes altogether and do our own thing? Ironically, there is comfort in being “yoked” to something or someone, when it has a benevolent character. Jesus offers us an opportunity to learn from him and serve alongside him in God’s kingdom work of creating and restoring right relationships, making our lives more meaningful and whole, and joining in the work of reconciling the world to God.

Think about Jesus’ words in the context of being a learner (disciple). Two oxen are chosen to share a yoke. The first is an older seasoned ox. He is trained and hardy from years of routine. The second is a new young ox. This one has energy and potential, but is inexperienced. By sharing the same yoke with a veteran workhorse, the elder trains the young. Not only that, but the experienced one pulls harder to bear the majority of the load. Since the older one leads, the young ox does not have to wonder what to do. The younger one learns from his mentor and gains the knowledge and skill to lead and teach others.

This is about discipleship. Jesus invites us to “learn of Him” which is another way of saying “live as my disciple”. There’s peace in not having to figure life out on our own. There’s assurance as we follow Jesus’ lead.

Jesus also declares that his yoke is easy. The word ‘easy’ here doesn’t imply ‘simple’, but ‘good’. If I’m yoked to Jesus, there’s peace in being yoked to someone good, loving, and patient. The paraphrase? “Get in the yoke with me. Let me disciple you. I’ll bear
the weight of your burden. My yoke is good and you will find rest and companionship in our labor together.”

The tension for me and maybe for you in being yoked to Jesus is the frequent tug I experience between being willful – wanting my own way, and willingness – submitting to God’s ways. This is what I think the apostle Paul was writing about in today’s reading from Romans 5. Each day there are choices. Do we insist on doing what we want, following our own way? Or do we listen for and follow Christ, the very wisdom of God? Some years ago I heard a musician offer in worship an original song he had written. I invite you to listen to this song by Rich Burns titled “Willing Heart”.

My hope is that it may be a prayer to which we return again and again, as we choose to take upon us Jesus’ yoke, and there indeed find deep rest for our souls.

**WILLING HEART** – Rich Burns

1. Once I stumbled in the darkness doing only as I pleased,
   But I wasn’t really happy and my heart was not at ease.
   I just didn’t have the willingness to follow God’s commands,
   ‘til I laid my life completely in God’s hands.

   **REFRAIN:**
   If you don’t have a willing heart, ask God to give you one
   If you can’t seem to make a start, trust in God’s power
   For the Lord of love is watching you, He sees what you’re going through
   And He will make a way if you want Him to, Oh – do you want Him to?
   Then tell Him so.

2. All the things my heart held onto, only filled me with despair
   And the road that I was travelin’ never took me anywhere
   And I knew no satisfaction, ‘til I found my rest in Him
   Then He filled my heart with gladness once again.

   **REFRAIN:**
   If you don’t have a willing heart, ask God to give you one
   If you can’t seem to make a start, trust in God’s power
   For the Lord of love is watching you, he sees what you’re going through
   And He will make a way if you want Him to, Oh – do you want Him to?
   Then tell Him so.
   He’d really like to know - Tell Him so. We need God so.