

The Yoke of History
Matthew 11:16-19, 28-30

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost/ 5th July 2020

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Mt. 11:28). These words have greater meaning these days. Many are weary. Everything seems, feels “heavy.” And we are tired. Jesus extended his invitations to a generation full of disappointment, loss, and confusion. His generation had high hopes for Jesus, and John the Baptist. But when the people heard them preach about God’s way of justice and righteousness, a way of mercy and peace, they accused John the Baptist of having demons and Jesus, they said, was a glutton and a drunkard because he preferred hanging out with tax-collectors and sinners rather than the pious (Mt. 11:18-19).

They went to Jesus with certain expectations and hopes for healing and change and even revolution against the brutal oppression of Rome. They were a people weighed down by crushing taxation, the rich got richer, the poor got poorer, and the poor and vulnerable felt the burden the most. Poverty is exhausting and soul-crushing. Jesus offered the secrets of the kingdom to them. He was sent for them, for the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, for all of us, really. But do we want what he has to offer us?

“Come to me, *all* you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, I will give you rest.” What are you carrying? What are your heavy burdens? Are you weary? Are you tired?

The days are challenging, the daily news is exhausting. Just consider all that we’ve weathered the past six months. A global pandemic, a virus out of control in the U.S., unemployment, economic instability, fear of the future, and considerable social unrest as the nation tries, again, to come to term with its past, the enslavement of Africans and the sinful legacy of racism.

Like you, I’m been doing a lot of thinking and reflecting upon all of this, trying to sense what the Spirit might be saying to us and maybe pushing us toward as Christians, as a church in this nation. Reflecting on this text I found myself asking, wondering: what are the collective burdens that we’re carrying these days, the collective heavy yokes under which we suffer, that exhaust and tire us and from which we need some rest? I find it curious that this Matthew 11 text is the lectionary reading for the Sunday following the Fourth of July when we celebrate our independence and give thanks to God for our liberties. It’s a text given at a time when we as a church and nation are painfully aware of the sin of slavery and our racist ideologies and theologies and the fact that black and brown and white bodies have all, and still continue to bear the yoke of this past.

Once we start learning more about the history of racism in the church and start filling in the gaps in the narrative, once we start talking about race and racism and systemic racism and white privilege and white supremacy, and social and economic inequities we begin to feel the weight of it all, the yoke of history hanging on our shoulders. That’s how I’m feeling. This is the heavy burden that came to mind when I heard Jesus’ invitation. Because I am, we are carrying a

heavy load that is almost too much for us to bear. Some can't bear it, some won't bear it, and deny it altogether. I think of that verse from the hymn, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, "God of our weary years, God of our silent tears..."¹ Those who have suffered most know the yoke of history.

You can feel the weight of the past as more Confederate monuments are removed; monuments built during Jim Crow. Look at what's happening in Richmond. And other monuments commemorating our past (or a myth of the past) are also coming down. But how far should we go in removing statues and monuments? It's complicated. Consider the current [debate](#) over the [Emancipation Memorial](#) in Lincoln Square in Washington, DC. Paid for by formerly enslaved blacks.² Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was there for its unveiling in 1876 and gave a speech. Today, there are African Americans who would like it removed and placed in museum; others think it should stay where it is.

Personally, I'm committed to learning more about racism in American history. I was a history and religion major in college. Before I felt called to ministry, I was going to be a church historian. But I'm embarrassed to confess how much I don't know, what was never taught to me, about racism, especially in the church. Such as Frederick Douglass' [speech](#) given in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852, when he said, "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than, all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless;...your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery;" and here he takes on the church, "your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety..."³ Douglass was just getting started. He goes on to offer a devastating critique of the church's complicity with the institution of slavery—in both the South and the North.

And talk about yoke of history, consider the white supremacist ideas firmly planted in American Christianity. Check out the [story](#) on NPR last week, which featured the story of Baptist and Presbyterian leaders, particularly the Rev. James Henley Thornwell—a Harvard-educated pastor who defended slavery and promoted white supremacy from his pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbia, SC, in the years leading up to the Civil War. Thornwell doesn't represent all Presbyterians at the time, of course, but we need to come clean about our history, especially here in Baltimore.

In Washington, west of the Capitol, there is the easily missed [Peace Monument](#), erected in 1877, and in need of repair. That says a lot, doesn't it? The monument to peace is deteriorating. There are two figures on the top of a marble base that embody Grief and History. Grief is weeping on the shoulders of History.

Theologically-speaking, we could say that we are in a time of reckoning, a *kairos* moment, a time when something new is trying break into history, into our awareness. This is a crucial time for the church. What would it mean for us to exchange the yoke of our history and its painful burdens that we continue to carry, whether we know it or not, with the yoke of Jesus? What would that look like? The one who says to us, "Come." The one who says to us, "Come,"

is not the Jesus of Christian nationalists or white supremacists; Jesus is not even white. What if this is a different Jesus than the one we grew up hearing about in church or learned about in Sunday School, a Jesus who doesn't look like the images of Jesus we had in our church school curricula. A Jesus who German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) encountered worshipping in churches in Harlem in the early 1930s, a "black Jesus," who allowed Bonhoeffer to see Jesus with new eyes.⁴

"Come to me," Jesus says.

"Come away from your burdens and struggles and fears and anxieties.

Here, allow me to remove them from your shoulders.

You've carried them far too long.

Here, give me your past.

Let it go.

Give it all to me.

Now take my yoke, my burden upon you,

learn from me—from me.

For the yoke I carry is the only yoke you were born to carry.

The yoke that I carry, the burden that I carry,

the burden that is my joy and my life and can become your joy and your life,

is the "heaviness" of God's kingdom,

God's vision for justice, and wholeness, and healing.

That's my burden and I give it to you in love.

For when I align my life with God's life—

when you align your life with God's life—

the yoke is easy,

and the burden becomes light,

because I—

we—

walk in a different way,

with gentleness and a humble heart."



Richmond, Virginia

¹ Initially a poem written by James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) for a school assembly at which Booker T. Washington (1856-1914) spoke on Lincoln's birthday, in 1900.

² History of the memorial: <https://historicsites.dcpreservation.org/items/show/176>. Current debate: https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/arguments-break-out-by-statue-of-abraham-lincoln-in-downtown-dc/2020/06/26/4f8b9e16-b7ef-11ea-aca5-ebb63d27e1ff_story.html

³ "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July" (1852). The full speech may be accessed here: <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/2945>. On the significance of this speech, see David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017). The full speech.

⁴ Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Baylor University Press, 2014).