

Matthew 11, vs. 16 to 19, 25 to 30. Come to Me, Yokes. July 5 2020

The other night, Phil and I were looking for a soothing program on Netflix to watch before we went to bed. We chose a new series, “Night on Earth”, that features how animals behave overnight in different settings. The episode we decided to watch was set on the African savannah, where we were treated to nighttime views using specialized cameras, of elephants, gazelles, rhinos, lions, and so on. It was fascinating, but not exactly the serene experience we’d anticipated; it turns out that animals tend to spend their nights either hunting or being hunted or both. If anything, it was rather stressful! We quickly learned not to get attached to any of the featured creatures, as they could be literally dead meat within moments before our very eyes.

Watching the program, I realized how I romanticize nature and the wild creatures that live therein. It’s easy to forget that animals within the wilds are locked into life-and-death battles for survival. So, while I might fantasize about how fun it might be to be swift gazelle, running across the plains of Africa, I realized I would actually be better off as either a lion, the predator on the top of the food chain; or a rhinoceros, whose natural armor provides safety from predators. Do you ever fantasize about being an animal? About flying like an eagle, or running free like wild horses, or howling at the moon like a wolf? Or even living the life of one of our pampered house pets, who seem to have relatively few worries and responsibilities? Whatever animal you might on occasion fantasize about being, I am about to name three animals that would probably be towards the bottom of your list, and ironically, they are the very animals we as humans are compared with in Scripture. The first and most obvious are sheep. Many a time, people are described in Scripture as being like sheep without a shepherd, for example. Sheep have their good points, being wooly and useful and cute, I guess; but they’re not terribly bright,

are they? And they're easily startled, vulnerable to harm, and have to be led everywhere. It's not that flattering a comparison.

Then there's chicks. Jesus tells the people of Jerusalem that he longs to gather them like a mother hen gathers her chicks beneath her wings. Chicks are kind of like sheep, aren't they? Cute, fluffy, potentially useful. But again, not terribly smart, vulnerable to harm, and needing constant supervision. Still not that flattering a comparison.

Today's lesson, though, presents us with another animal comparison for humanity, but don't get your hopes up, because we're not going to be compared to majestic eagles or wild horses running free or even cherished dogs or cats. This time it's an ox. Oxen are the animals that were yoked in Biblical times. So when Jesus suggests that we take his yoke upon us and learn from him, he is drawing this image from an every day scene known very well to those to whom he spoke: yoked oxen. Oxen were essential in the 1st C. Owning one ox was considered a bare minimum for existence among the folks of Jesus' day; owning a herd of oxen was a sign of wealth and status. And who fashioned the wooden yokes to go around the necks of the oxen? A carpenter, of course! And carpentry was the trade Jesus worked, as his father, Joseph, had before him. Christ was a carpenter and had likely made any number of yokes for oxen as a part of his livelihood. This image was second nature for him, and he knew very well of what he spoke.

Oxen, of course, do have their good points. They are strong and dependable workers. They are cheap to keep, since grass is the mainstay of their diet. But, noble though oxen may be, I still don't find this comparison especially flattering or encouraging. Because oxen plod. They work, they plod, they pull, they plod, they strain under heavy loads, they plod. Theirs was a life

of labor. So, why an ox, for heaven's sake? Why couldn't Jesus describe us as lap dogs or proud lions or something a little more elegant, majestic, or special? I would bet that oxen would fall near the bottom of *anyone's* fantasy animal list. What's Jesus up to here?

Let's back up for a moment to the beginning of our passage from Matthew, which is set in the midst of a controversy about Jesus and John the Baptizer. We're somewhat entering into this text as into the middle of a conversation. In our minds, 2000 years after the fact, there *was* no controversy; John the Baptist was a forerunner to Christ; a great prophet, but not the messiah. In the minds of their peers, however, this distinction was not so clear. Both men had a powerful spiritual presence, both drew large crowds and ardent followers, both were courageous men of Jewish faith who didn't mind upsetting either their own religious leaders or the Roman occupiers. To the people of their day, they were both high profile leaders, but with *very* different styles. John the Baptizer was a zealot and an ascetic, by which I mean he lived as one consumed with zeal and away from the comforts of his times, such as they were. He was like a hermit, perhaps, or a monk of a particularly austere order. You recall he dressed in camel skins and ate locusts and honey and lived in the desert and had a particularly confrontational style. His message was one of judgment and repentance. He was an extremist. And while his fiery brand of prophecy appealed to many, it also caused many others to condemn him as an extremist. He didn't satisfy their expectations.

In contrast, Jesus had a warm, appealing personality. He told stories, he turned water into wine, he blessed children, he hung out in the taverns with tax collectors and sinners. He also denounced injustice and sin, and he *could* get angry—think of the merchant's tables being

overturned in the temple. But, Jesus was *not* an ascetic, he *didn't* live away from people and shun the comforts and pleasures of the average person. And while his brand of ministry also appealed to many; it also caused others to condemn him as being a mere pleasure seeker who lived to no higher standard than they did. *He didn't* meet their expectations either.

Our text this morning opens with Jesus offering a critique of the crowd's capacity to be perennially dissatisfied with the leaders God sent to them. Jesus informed them that they were like children who couldn't get along with one another and shouted at each other across the marketplaces, "We wanted you to dance to our tune, and you wouldn't! We wanted you to feel bad for us when we feel bad, and you wouldn't! You aren't playing the game right!" He goes on to point out that John's extremely stringent lifestyle caused people to conclude that John was demon possessed, while *his* approach of embracing life and people and common pleasures caused them to accuse *him* of gluttony. These folks were, in short, never satisfied. Those doing God's work couldn't win for losing, whatever they did. Jesus plainly tells them that they are like petulant children, looking for fault in others, wanting everyone to dance to their tune. His analysis fit the generation to which he spoke, and it probably fits present generations as well. We prefer leaders to do as we like. We like other people to satisfy our needs. We are quick to find fault and grow antagonistic. We are like children, not in the positive sense of being child-like, receptive, and open to wonder; but in the negative sense of merely being childish; of wanting our own way; of seeing ourselves as the center of every situation. In his prophetic role, Jesus had little interest in stroking the ego of his listeners, but rather held up a mirror for them to recognize some unpleasant truths about themselves. God has a way of doing that for us also, and I don't suppose we like it any more than they did.

And that brings us back to my original starting point and to the second section of our Scripture lesson, where we are no longer being compared to children in the marketplace, but to an animal. And not a fun animal we might fantasize about being, but rather that lowly ox. Jesus, the skillful carpenter who knew how important it was to fashion and fit the yoke correctly about the neck of oxen, had this to say to people an awful lot like us: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Although being an ox may still not exactly appeal, this *is* an appealing invitation, isn’t it? “*Come to me*”, Jesus says, “*all you who are weary*”. And we are weary, aren’t we? Weary of this ongoing pandemic, of the restrictions it mandates, of the difficult choices it asks us to make, of the consequences, both economic and social. And, we are weary of racial issues and the injustices that don’t go away; weary of needing to do hard thinking about how to create a more equitable system of justice and law enforcement within our nation. We are weary of whatever individual struggles in which we engage, of whatever particular burdens we are carrying, weary of ourselves, at times, and just wishing life was less anxious and weighty. “*Come to me*”, Jesus says. “*I know* you’re weary. I know you’re burdened. It’s partly because your yoke isn’t properly fashioned and fitted. Which means you’re working too hard at things that don’t matter, or you’re trying to pull everything together by yourself instead of in tandem with me or others. *Come to me*. I will give you rest for your souls. *Come to me*; the world is loud, aggressive, and the biggest bullies win; but *I am* gentle and humble in heart. *Come to me*.” This is, in fact, a very personal, engaging, and appealing invitation.

So let's re-think being an ox for a moment. Do we *really* just want to be a pampered pooch or a free, running wild horse in God's kingdom on earth? It sounds appealing initially, sure; but don't we want our lives to have a little more significance and impact than that? When you come to think of it, don't we actually *want and hope* to respond to the grace of God with a life lived well? A life that glorifies God and betters our neighbor? If we're going to put our backs into some efforts in this world, wouldn't we like it to be in the service of Christ and for the good of the world? And wouldn't we like a calling and a yoke fashioned for us by Christ? One that fits us well, that frees us even as we work, that allows us to both do some productive plowing for God and our neighbor *and* to find rest for our souls?

Our prayer of the day quoted one of the great lines written by Augustine: "our hearts are restless until they rest in you." How true it is that our hearts are restless, troubled, or searching; that our minds are not quiet; that our souls are not at peace. A sense of unease and uncertainty is so commonplace right now as to be practically a given. Christ issues an invitation directly for us whose hearts are restless, who feel burdened and ill at ease, who are weary and weighed down by cares. "Come to me.....and you will find rest for your souls." I'm thinking that being an ox isn't such a bad thing after all; to be useful in the kingdom of God, to do work for which we are suited with a yoke fashioned specifically for us; surely this is a good and Godly thing, a way of living out our faith that blesses this world that God so loves *and* gives rest to our souls. Hear this morning Christ's invitation as one extended to you: "Come to me". Amen.