

Dancing Lessons

(Matthew 11:28-30) Jesus said: Are you having a real struggle? Come to me! Are you carrying a big load on your back? Come to me — I'll give you a rest! Pick up my yoke and put it on; take lessons from me, I'll be gentle with you! The last thing in my heart is to give you a hard time. You'll see — rest you need, and rest you shall have. My yoke is easy and my burden is light.

My father was an avid runner. He ran the River Bank Run in Grand Rapids for more than 18 years and always seemed to be preparing to run in some shorter race as well. He loved to run and also pushed himself very hard. But over the years he developed significant knee problems from running. My mother kept telling him he needed to stop because of the damage it was doing to his knees, and he was concerned that he might have to do that.

But he learned after going to a podiatrist that the problem wasn't the running. The reason his knees were getting torn up when he ran was because of the way his feet and legs were aligned. He needed some inserts in his shoes that would hold up a certain part of his foot in a certain way so that his whole body would be in alignment. When he started wearing orthotics in his running shoes, his feet and legs were aligned better, and he ran faster and with much more ease. His orthotics helped carry the load of his body in such a way that it could do the job of running more efficiently. And his knees were spared from further damage.

Our text today isn't about orthotics, of course. It is about yokes. Yokes were made for oxen and other beasts of burden to help them pull plows and carry loads. A well-made yoke would do the same thing an orthotic does: help the beast carry the weight in a way that made it easier. Back in Jesus's day, these yokes were made out of wood.

Most of us know that before Jesus went into the ministry full-time he was a carpenter — a wood worker. And he would have made yokes for animals. Like many men of his day he was a tradesman. Now most tradesmen or tradeswomen I know tend to have some specialties in the work they do. For example, I knew a seamstress in south Georgia who could sew about anything, but her specialty was drapes. If you wanted the best custom-made draperies in Macon, Georgia, you went to Miss Dinah! Quite a few years ago the transmission blew on my Ford Sabre Station wagon. Allene Smith, from our congregation, told me about a man here in Benton Harbor who specialized in working on transmissions. He fixed it for a price that was much less than I would have paid had I taken it to the dealership. The transmission ran perfectly until some other problems meant the car needed to go to the junk yard.

Jesus the Yoke Maker?

Trades people often have specialties in their craft, and William Barclay, the Bible scholar, records in his commentary on this text in Matthew that there is a legend that Jesus made the best ox yokes in all of Galilee, and that men came from all over the country to buy his yokes. In Palestine, ox yokes were made of wood; the ox was brought, and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then roughed out, and the ox was brought back to have the yoke tried on. The yoke was then carefully adjusted so that it would fit well and would not gall the neck of the beast. Just as my dad needed shoes that would carry his weight more efficiently and in a way that didn't hurt him, so an ox can work better if the yoke fits right. If a yoke was made well, the ox could even do MORE work because he wouldn't necessarily realize the heavy load he was bearing. The yoke was tailor-made to fit the ox.

Barclay writes that there may well have been a sign over Jesus's carpenter shop door that said, "My yokes fit well." That would be a good way to advertise his specialty.

Now, of course, in our text for today, Jesus is not talking about making yokes for oxen that pull plows or other burdens, but for men and women carrying the burdens of life. But the people hearing this may have known his alleged reputation as a great yoke maker. And Jesus was not

only talking about men and women carrying the burdens of life: He was also addressing people who are bearing the burdens of their religion — carrying the belief that they must constantly have to follow all the laws and all the rules to be accepted by God.

And Jesus may be saying that, just as he is good at getting to know and measure an ox to fashion a tailor-made yoke for that particular ox, in a similar way Jesus will tailor-make our human yokes. He will teach us how to carry our loads so they don't gall our necks or wear us out.

Now that is some very good news. What a wonderful thought to think of Jesus custom-making a yoke for each of us — made just right so we can do the work we've been called to do.

Rest Amid Our Burdens; Not a Vacation

But frankly, there is a surprise here, isn't there? Read the first line of the text: "Are you tired? Exhausted? Worn out?" Sounds like the beginning of some kind of vacation commercial. You want to say, "YES! And when do I get a break? When can I go away from it all for a while?"

While Jesus surely offers us rest, He doesn't offer us a vacation here. We are invited to participate in God's work in the world and, frankly, sometimes in our lives we have burdens to bear, don't we?

Many of you in our congregation are bearing burdens today — family matters, financial matters, health matters and the like. Sometimes those burdens can be pretty darned heavy. And as God's people we also have burdens to bear as we live out our call. This congregation in particular sometimes carries a heavy load as we work on issues of racial reconciliation, hunger, poverty, justice in the school districts and the incarceration of some of our men, and so much more. Sometimes the loads can be pretty darned heavy and we want to shout and say, "God can you just give us a vacation!! Take this load from me; take these loads from us!"

But in this text Jesus doesn't say he will take the load. Rather, he says he will give us a yoke that makes that load easier to bear. We will get spiritual orthotics so we can run this race without wearing out, or we'll get a better-fitting yoke so that these burdens won't gall our necks. Jesus wants us to rest and help us carry these loads. He offers to teach us to do our work, to carry the stuff of this life in a new way, in a way that we can feel more rested and handle the burdens of our life with grace.

Lent is supposed to be a time in the church when we assess our lives and how we are living. We could say it is a time to look at the burdens we are bearing and do a yoke adjustment — or, probably more accurately, ask Jesus to do the yoke adjustment. My dad would go to the podiatrist quite regularly to get his orthotics readjusted. We often talk about giving things up for Lent, and there is a focus sometimes on fasting in Lent — fasting from particular foods, TV, and whatnot. The goal of this kind of fasting is supposed to be for us to detach from things in our lives that occupy our attention and affections so we can be freer — freer to focus on God and God's ways. Sometimes our habits add to the load we are carrying, and we need to be free from them for a while.

But fasting, while an important discipline, is not meant to be a huge weight that bears us down or a load of guilt that crushes our spirit. Rather, fasting is supposed to take the weight off, to free us so that we can follow God more freely.

Is It Time for God to Refit Our Yokes?

So this Lent, are you tired? Are you worn out? Are you burdened by life or grief or even burdened by the things you think God wants you to do? Maybe this Lent, you — we — are being invited to have God refit our yokes. To teach us how to hold the things of our lives in new ways.

And honestly, my friends, I'm not exactly sure what that means. We are all hard workers around here and we take our work and our commitments seriously. We trust Jesus, but we also

bear a lot, don't we? What does it mean to carry the yoke Jesus has for us? What would it look like to get spiritual orthotics put in our shoes for the journey?

As many of you know, our congregation received a Lilly Sabbatical Grant for this year. The theme of this grant is "renewal and rest" — learning as a congregation how to be spiritually renewed and to rest while also doing this important work God has invited us to do. A large portion of this grant will allow me to step aside for three months this summer for a season to pray and play and listen for God in new ways.

And in the grant there is money for the congregation. Much of that money will be used to hire our summer pastor, Rev. Deborah McCreary, who, by the way, was received by the Committee on Ministry of the Presbytery this week. But some of that money will be made available to you to try out your own renewal and rest practices. We will have a meeting after church on March 19 to tell you more about this. But the invitation is to discern how to live out the ministry we've been called to while weaving rest and renewal more intentionally into our life together.

It's time for some yoke adjustments and to adjust our spiritual and church orthotics!

Let's D-A-N-C-E

At the risk of throwing out too many metaphors here, I'd like to say that one of the images we have had as we think about all this is the image of dancing, that we are invited by God to dance through this life, and our ministry is meant to be a kind of dance we do, with God leading and inspiring us.

A person can't dance if she or he is weighted down much — then the dance would be a plod! So we need to nurture deep trust in God who is leading us and can help us carry the loads we have been called to carry — the privilege of the work we are called to do.

As I said, I'm not exactly sure what it means to have God readjust our yokes. That surely is

something God does and not us. But our part is to be open. And there are also some practices we may want to try this Lent that can help us with some shifting in how we bear the loads if God is wanting to do that.

I will use the letters of D-A-N-C-E to give us some things we can do to open ourselves more fully to God, who may be wishing to do a new thing in us — a spiritual orthotic adjustment or a yoke adjustment, if you will.

D – DABBLE in something new. My dad had to relearn how to run — to use new muscles — when he got his orthotics. It was a shift. When we try new things, we learn to use new parts of ourselves so that we rely on the old standby parts less.

Sometimes trying out something new in life can help us relearn how to live. You may want to take up coloring this Lent. Dance with God and some crayons in these Lenten Coloring Books. We purchased 10 of them. If you would like one and would really use it, please take it. But if you don't think you will really use it, just leave it so someone else can use it. You may want to try bird watching or child watching. If you are an active person, you may want to try a new sport — biking or golf or yoga. You may want to turn off the radio in your car as you are traveling some place and listen to the sounds of spring starting to come into our area. Or maybe you will take time each day to read some poetry. You may want to use some Sabbatical grant money and go to the nature center or take an art class or go to the Y. Dabble in something new. New things help our load become lighter.

A – ASK for help. We live in a culture where individualism is valued. That is not a bad thing. Self-reliance is important. But we are also made for community, and sometimes our yokes are heavy because we are doing too much by ourselves. Now, yes, of course, we ask God for help. If your load is heavy right now, by all means pour out that load in anguish to God.

Most of us think we are meant to carry the loads of our lives alone. We will pray and ask God,

but we hesitate to ask each other for help. Ask a friend for help, if you need it. Now, they might say no and they might not be able to help you. You know, sometimes the loads we bear in life are so big for a season that we can't even pray. That is the time to ask others to pray for us — knowing that when we can't even pray, God's people will pray for us.

N – NAP. Yes, I said “Nap.” This Lent, trust God enough to take a nap or two. Put your burden in an imaginary bowl, offer it to God and ask God to take care of it while you rest. For some this will be easy. For others this will be hard. Napping can be a discipline of radical trust. But this Lent, as we learn to bear Christ's yoke and dance with Jesus, let's take some naps. In these days of political change, we may need to take a daily nap from the news. One thing a wise colleague told me once about sermon writing is that when you get stuck, the best thing to do is stop trying to fix it. Take a break. Do something different. Rest. New things can grow in times of rest.

And think about the daffodils right now. They just went through a season of rest, underground, napping for the winter 'til spring comes. We Christians need to learn how to nap more.

C - CUT OUT AND CUT UP. First, “cut out.” When we read about Jesus's life, we see that he took regular times away to be with God for renewal. He still carried the load of his ministry, but he put it aside for a time to refresh and renew and hear from God. The Sabbath is meant to be a way to do that. Even God took a day to rest after God was done creating the world.

The rhythm of time to rest is an important part of the cycle of life, and too often in our culture we follow the stream of 24/7 news cycles and the Energizer bunny and keep going and going. So, turn off the news for a day, or plan some time each week to play a round of golf or have that extra time with a friend. Cut out and trust the work to God.

And “cut up:” Adopt some humor. Now, that is one thing many of you around here are pretty good at. But let's continue to nurture taking ourselves “lightly.”

E – E IS FOR EVERY ... EVERY DAY. Every day during Lent, pray. Maybe it will be when you put your head on the pillow. Maybe it will be when you are washing your face or drinking your coffee. Maybe you will use a devotional. Maybe you will turn off the radio in your car and pray as you drive to work. If we want to learn to dance more closely with Jesus, praying every day surely will help us follow his lead and listen for his voice whispering in our ears. Some of you already do this. If you don't, be gentle with yourself and discern a way to add prayer into your life.

So, as we ask Jesus to adjust our yokes this Lent, let's D-A-N-C-E: Dabble in something new, ask for help, take a nap, cut out and cut up, and pray every day.

Those things can help us get started as we learn to bear the yokes we've been given in new ways. Like I said, I'm not sure how to do this either, so we can learn together, and if you have ideas and thoughts and things you are learning about how to carry this work, let me know!

One of the pastors in this community whom I've gotten the privilege of knowing in my time here is Willie T. Burton from New Paradise Baptist Church. Pastor Burton has been at New Paradise for over 40 years, I believe. When you talk to him, he is passionate about three things — Jesus, his people, and justice. After 40 years of faithful, under-the-radar work, he still has a sparkle in his eye and his presence brings joy to people. He grew up in the South and has seen a lot of hardship and discrimination in his days. He has had people come and go from his church. And he has seen a lot of change in our community. But he wears the yoke of his ministry lightly because he dances with God. You can tell when you are with him. He loves God so much and is always giving God glory for what God has done for him.

Let's close by hearing our text one more time:

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Sermon delivered Sunday, March 5, 2017

First Presbyterian Church of Benton Harbor

The Rev. Laurie Hartzell

back? Come to me — I'll give you a rest! Pick up my yoke and put it on; take lessons from me, I'll be gentle with you! The last thing in my heart is to give you a hard time. You'll see — rest you need, and rest you shall have. My yoke is easy and my burden is light.