

**Sermon: 2020/07/05 (5th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A) -
Genesis 24:34-38,42-49,58-67; Psalm 45: 11-18; Romans
7:15-25a; &, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30_BTR**

[Make a "yoke" out of MDF or wood with a jigsaw-cutter. Drill a hole at either end and tie a length of rope through both to be used as "reigns." Print, laminate a picture of a plough, as well as necklace-signs saying, "Money," "Success," "Fame," etc. And one with a quote from Jesus: 'Learn from me!']

Today, Jesus spoke about "yokes."

What is that?

A 'yoke'.

Do you know?

Was He referring to...egg "yokes"?

Or something else?

(There is a clue in the text: this thing called a "yoke" is 'heavy': [11:28].)

[Pause.]

Right!

Jesus was speaking - *metaphorically* - about an *essential* piece of farming equipment, used - *for thousands of years* - to control - *to guide* - cattle in the task of ploughing a field.

[Grab the "yoke." Ask for two volunteers.]

The 'yoke' is placed across the shoulders of a pair of oxen, and from it would run two ropes back to a big, heavy blade - like a big knife, called a 'plough' - that would drag *through* the ground to turn up the dry top-soil, and *flip it over(!)*, so that seed could be spread in the soft, damp stuff beneath.

[Place the plough picture around neck. Encourage children to pull against you. Resist.]

And it was hard work!

Pulling that thing: the plough.

Well, Jesus observes that people - you and I - tend to burden *ourselves* with a yoke-and-plough of the wrong things:

"Things" like ambition;

selfishness;

material wealth.

[Clip necklace-signs to plough picture, one-by-one.]

With ambition of being rich or famous or successful or handsome or clever.
And we *chase* these things and *exhaust* ourselves.
But we needn't!

Instead, Jesus offers us a different burden -

[Unclip all necklace-signs. Add 'Learn from me.']

'Learn from me.' [Mt. 11:29]

(He says.)

This is the 'burden' of righteousness; of imitating - that means, "copying" - Him;
of being holy; of living *simple, modest* lives that please God.

It is, then, still a "yoke;" and it *can* still be heavy...

[Encourage children to pull again, but resist their efforts less so that all make a stumbling progress forward.]

But *this* one guides us to an eternal life of bliss and peace and rest in Heaven!

[Dismiss children back to their seats.]



In my "Sunday School" lesson last week - on the (almost) sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, I observed that the stories of the Biblical heroes - apart from testifying to just how incredibly *ancient* God's plan for the universe is - is that those "stories" are *mainly* preserved to be a lasting and timeless witness to the sort of conduct - the sort of "simple, modest" lives - that God intends us to pursue.

That is to say, the patriarchs - Jesus' ancestors - are "shadows," *reflections* in a "dim mirror" [see 1 Cor. 13:12], precursors, or, if you prefer, *prototypes* of the perfect, holy life He - the Savior - had to lead to be the pure, spotless Lamb acceptable to God as a sacrifice for our sins.

Well, the very nature of a prototype is that it is a *first*; it is untested; a work-in-progress.

There are, then, usually some "kinks" to work out. Improvements to be made.

A "prototype" is *never* the fastest or the best of its kind. It requires further development, "tweaking," and, *revision*.

- Just imagine, for example, what the first yoke-and-plough was like! Its earliest attestation is in primitive rock-cut pictographs from Mesopotamia 'in the second half of the fourth millennium B.C.' - so about seven *millennia* ago.[n.1] This is *looong* (!) before mankind had discovered how to extract and smelt hard metals like iron, so the blade for slicing up and turning the ground was made of softer stuff like a bovine shoulder-blade or wood. And it was a revolution! A *miracle* - compared to hoeing, that is. Now, (from then on), fewer people could utilise a larger area for growing crops. *And* without bending over all day in the hot sun, blistering their hands. (One scholar speaks of a '400 per cent increase in productivity'.[n.2])

These days, I imagine, John Deere - or whoever it is who makes ploughs - probably tests them using wind-tunnels and lasers. And yokes, of course, are museum-pieces. Antiques. You see them up on the walls (as decoration) in Cracker Barrel restaurants. *That's* how far we've come. That an item - a piece of equipment - which quite literally changed the course of human history and helped to "give birth" to civilization itself is now only used as wall-art. Outside of the "Global South," that is.

And excepting the most extreme fundamentalist, Anabaptist groups here in North America.

At best, then, the yoke-and-plough is something we might view as quaint and rustic; at worst as a symbol of backwardness and close-mindedness; of primitive stupidity.

Which brings me to what we see taking place in our Old Testament reading, (from *Genesis* (chapter) twenty-four:

Abraham sent a servant on a *very* special mission - "a special mission" to find his son, Isaac, a suitable wife.

A wife who would be a partner in helping Isaac "play his part" to fulfil God's promise of bringing into existence a priestly people - a people "set apart" - a people who would be 'a city on a hill' [Mt. 5:14] - an enlightened nation, to lead all other nations.

What a *huge* responsibility that was!

This would need to be an exceptional woman.

The servant sent to find her is the one we hear speaking for most of the passage. Indeed, the entirety of what we see on page one, at least, (from *Genesis*), is the - unnamed - servant talking.

And this "mission" he had been entrusted with is evidence that he wasn't just *any* servant, of whom Abraham, a *wealthy* man in his old age, had many.

No, this (particular) 'servant' was - and I quote - 'the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he had'. [24:2]

In other words, if this had been Victorian or Edwardian England and not the Bronze Age Middle East - you'd typically call *that* kind of servant, *the butler*.

(In the TV show *Downton Abbey*, if you know it, this person was "Mr Carson.")

Does that help?)

"The butler" knew *everything* and *everyone* in their master's household.

They understood both the "big picture" *and* they had a firm grasp of all the minute details too.

Such a man was a man that had proved his reliability with even intimate and embarrassing matters.

A man of "his word."

Loyal like a retriever.

Unflappable.

Stoic.

Grounded.

This is why Abraham sends *this* man to find a wife for Isaac rather than Isaac himself:

The servant is *eminently* more qualified to make a good, *sensible* choice.

Yes, you heard me, "more qualified," even, than Isaac, the groom-to-be.

But perhaps my saying so shocks you?

This *thoroughly* unromantic approach to *arranging* a marriage and to human reproduction seems *very* foreign to us doesn't it?

Very antiquated.

Like the yoke-and-plough.

Backward.

Primitive.

Close-minded.

These days, we expect young adults to "play the field;" to *date*.

Parents tend to "stand back," cross their fingers, pray – if they are Christian, and hope-for-the-best; that, perhaps at college, or in the local bar, "Junior," having brushed his hair and sprayed on some deodorant, will gather *just* enough confidence to "strike" up conversation with *just* the right kind of easy-to-please "gal;" to win her over with a few funny one-liners and tasteful compliments; find that, by some stroke of luck, they share a critical overlap of interests and, eventually, by a great deal of trial and error, some heartache and "mis-fires," "settle down."

If mum and dad play any part in this convoluted "guessing game," it is mostly as spectators, though there is usually a significant dinner toward the end of the process, when "Junior" or his female equivalent have already made-up-their-mind, and present their "significant other" to the family as a *fait accompli*, firmly expecting parents to abide by the choice made, and, uncomplainingly, pick up the (enormous) cheque for the wedding.

And sex, of course, is assumed to be and is in fact practiced as an integral element in all this too, (though it largely complicates it): that is to say, couples "try" their partners "between the sheets," as if test-driving a car.

And indeed, it is now routine to "try" living together too.

And to trial-run having children by purchasing a dog.

And is this working?

This amalgam of cultural habits?

Well, how does one measure its success?

And is it suggestive that almost 50% of marriages end in divorce in this country?

I think that that statistic by itself points to an uncomfortable truth:

Not all "progress" is progress.

And perhaps there is a better way somewhere between the one method we see in this morning's text and the awful mess we're making today of love and relationships.

A way more pleasing to God and better for us too.

Let's pray:

Footnotes:

1. Moorey, P. R. S. (1999), *Ancient Mesopotamian Materials and Industries*, Winona Lake, I. N.: Eisenbrauns, 2.
2. Potts, Daniel T. (1997), *Mesopotamian Civilization: The Material Foundations*, Itaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 73.