

The World on Our Shoulders

Sermon preached at Foundry United Methodist Church
on Sunday, July 7, 2002
by Dean J. Snyder

Matthew 11: 28-30

I want to begin by saying how happy and excited Jane and I are to be here. Foundry United Methodist Church is a special place and a special people, and I consider it a real honor for the bishop and cabinet to have selected me to minister here with you.

I want to publicly express my appreciation to Phil Wogaman and to Carolyn for their generosity in spending time with Jane and myself these past months. I suppose that Phil and I spent a dozen hours all together these past weeks talking about Foundry. I had endless questions and he answered them patiently and thoughtfully.

I was struck again during those conversation with how remarkably wise, caring and generous a person Philip Wogaman is. I will confess to being a little intimidated. I hope his wisdom and intelligence are qualities that convey with the office, and now that I have moved here I will automatically become wise and profound and statesmanlike - all the things that Phil is. We'll see.

I want to also say a word of thanks to Foundry's clergy and lay staff. We have begun to meet and to get to know each other. This week we will be spending a day together in retreat at my home. The staff has received us graciously.

Then, too, I want to express my appreciation to the Staff-Parish Relations Committee. They are the ones who met me first, asked me some very good questions and who have facilitated my appointment here. I'd like to ask those members of the SPRC here in this service this morning to stand and be recognized. Thank you for your hospitality.

Please pause with me for a word of prayer:

You, O Holy One, are master of the galaxies, yet closer than a sister. In your mysterious way, be present in these words I will speak and in the bread and wine we receive. We give you thanks, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Matthew 11: 28-30: "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."

My son David is 29 now, so it must have 26 or 27 years ago that I was playing with him on the living room floor on a rare Saturday morning off. I was lifting him above me and throwing him into the air when a jolt of pain like I had never felt before, and have rarely experienced since, shot up my back and left lying flat on my back on the living room floor afraid to move for the pain. After a couple hours and a handful of aspirin,

when I could walk again, a friend suggested I see a chiropractor.

The chiropractor I picked out the yellow pages was the first person I'd ever met who did not know what a Methodist was. She had grown up in a non-religious home, experimented with a counter-cultural lifestyle and drugs during the 60s, and at some point in her life had turned to alternative medicine and chiropractors to find wholeness and meaning.

During my first visit, when she asked me what I did, and I answered that I was a Methodist minister, she looked back at me with an expression of total incomprehensibility.

I was the first Methodist and the first minister that she had ever met.

During my weekly visits to her office, she always asked me questions about my work. Because, in those days, I assumed people outside the church would not be interested in things like prayer, Scripture, worship and spirituality, I told her about my church's ministries of compassion and social concern. I talked about our emergency shelter for the homeless, and our peacemaking ministries, and our community organizing, and our mission trips to Central America, and all the ministries we hoped to do but didn't seem to have time for yet.

After I'd been visiting her office for a number of months, and had talked on and on about all of our efforts to save the world, one day she asked me to sit down in her office. Only years later did it occur to me that this may have been a difficult thing for her to do. She looked me in the eye, and said to me these words: "I know what you do. I know that you are a Reverend, and all," she said. "But, there is only so much that I am going to be able to do to help your back if you insist on carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders."

I am afraid she had me pegged. My only excuse is that I follow One who chose to carry the weight of the sins of the world on his shoulders. And I am a Methodist. Methodism was begun by John Wesley who loved to quote from the book of James the verse that says "Faith without works is dead."

Methodists historically are Christians who believe it is our personal responsibility to nurse every hurt, heal every disease, eradicate every evil, and right every wrong.

One of John Wesley's favorite sayings went like this: "Do all the good you can, By all the means you can, In all the ways you can, In all the places you can, At all the times you can, To all the people you can, As long as ever you can."

He had another one about money that went: "Earn all you can, save all you can, give all you can."

British Methodists refer to these sayings as "the Wesleyan can-can."

Methodism is an activist expression of the Christian faith. Some have gone so far as to call Methodism compulsive Christianity.

And I confess this morning that I am very Methodist. No congregation I have served has ever complained that my expectations of them were too low. No staff I have led has complained that they were under-deployed. There have been very few needs I've seen in the world around me that I have been willing to patiently wait for others to meet.

Foundry is a very Methodist congregation. I know many of us here come from different faith traditions and may still identify with the faith that nurtured us even though we may attend Foundry. We may not all think of ourselves as primarily Methodist, but Methodism has a way, in every generation, of drawing her own to herself.

This is what I've noticed so far. When Foundry publishes a calendar, it is a mission calendar consisting entirely of mission groups and mission meetings. That's very Methodist.

When Foundry decides to hold a concert of great and wonderful music to uplift men and women's souls, somebody says, "Hey, while we're enjoying the music, why don't we raise \$100,000 to fight AIDS at the same time." That's very Methodist.

During my first week on the job here, up until today, I had met more of our city's homeless here in the church looking for help than I had so far met members. That's very Methodist.

Because Methodists tend to be activists and sometimes compulsively so, it was interesting to me that the ecumenical lectionary Gospel lesson for this particular Sunday was about Jesus' yoke being easy and his burden light.

I don't always preach on the lectionary lessons, but I always try to read them as part of my personal devotions, and the lesson for this particular Sunday grabbed me.

It is a reminder that, even though he said that we should pick up our crosses and follow him, following Jesus ought not be oppressive.

His yoke is easy and his burden is light.

There are three quick thoughts I want to lift up from this text this morning.

First, there is a burden. Jesus didn't say, "Come onto me, my burden is nonexistent." There is a burden. I don't want to suggest this morning that following Jesus is a cakewalk. We are compelled by Christ to live lives of mercy and justice. We are called to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, cloth the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners and welcome the stranger. We are required to eradicate racism and sexism and homophobia and classism and poverty and prejudice and hate.

There is a yoke to pull and a burden for us to carry. John Wesley was right that there is no vital faith that does not result in work in the world. There is a cross, there is a yoke, there is a burden.

But, second, Jesus' yoke is easy. The actual meaning of what Jesus said is "My yoke rides easy." My father was a farmer. As a young man, before he bought a tractor, he actually farmed with mules. This is what he told me: That when you are farming with a mule, more important than the weight of the load is whether the harness fits the animal perfectly. If the harness fits right, mules can pull an enormous amount of weight without tiring.

Jesus' yoke is easy because it fits us personally. Jesus doesn't ask us to become something we're not in order to follow him. Our calling comes out of our internal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, not out of some external and artificial sense of ought.

One of the reasons church people sometimes get tired and cranky is because we are trying to meet someone else's definition of righteousness rather than living out the truth that God has placed within us. Or we are trying to fulfill roles and understandings we have inherited rather than deploying the gifts God has uniquely given each of us.

Jesus' yoke rides easy because it fits us.

And, third, Jesus' burden is light because he carries it with us. I'm sorry if this sounds overly simplistic or pietistic, but I don't know how else to say it. Jesus' burden is light because he carries it with us.

A couple weeks ago I read Professor Stanley Hauerwas' 2001 Gifford Lectures. There was an intriguing footnote in one of his chapters about William James. William James was, of course, America's first great psychologist and, in many ways, the father of the field of social studies and a shaper of the American tradition of liberal arts, his book "The Varieties of Religious Experience" has probably influenced the way we, as Americans, think about religion than any other work.

In a short footnote in one of Hauerwas' chapters, he says that William James once wrote inside the cover of a copy of his book that he gave to a colleague, these words: "You might class me a Methodist, minus a savior." William James thought of himself as a Methodist, minus a savior.

When I read that I thought to myself, and I know it is more complicated than this, but still I thought to myself, "No wonder the man was depressed."

What an awful thing it would be to have all the burdens and sense of responsibility and compulsions even of being a Methodist ... minus a savior.

Jesus' burden is light because he carries it with us.

Not long after I went to the chiropractor for help with my back, I went through a particularly hard time in my life. It was maybe 20 years ago. I was living near the University of Pennsylvania in west Philadelphia. I was burned out, I guess. I was trying to save the world, and one day I came to the realization that I was tired and depleted and unhappy and that I wasn't doing a good job of even saving my own family.

I was at a turning point in my career and considering leaving the ministry. After church services on Sundays, I got in the habit of coming home and changing my clothes and taking long walks through the neighborhood around the university to try to think things through.

One Sunday I'd been walking for hours and, as evening was falling, I walked past a movie theatre converted into a storefront church. It was summer and the doors of the church were open and I could hear somebody singing and it sounded like a young Sam Cooke, singing a song with the same cadence as "Under the Boardwalk."

I stopped and stood outside the church where no one could see me to listen to the music for a while. But I guess somebody could see me because an usher, wearing a black suit with a handkerchief in his pocket, came over and invited me into the service.

I told him I couldn't go into church the way I was dressed. I'd changed into cut-off shorts and a tea-shirt that said "I Goldberg's for all your camping needs."

He told me that God didn't care how I was dressed and we shouldn't either. And I found myself going into the converted movie theatre and sitting in one of the chairs in the back row.

After the music, an old preacher preached a sermon that I thought a little rambling and frankly too disorganized for my taste. But I sat through the sermon.

After the sermon he invited the congregation forward to the altar for prayer. To my surprise I found myself, in my cut-off shorts and T-shirt, getting out of my seat and walking to the altar and kneeling there.

The old preacher came over and asked me if he could pray with me and I told him I wished he would. He asked me if I was a Christian. He may have asked me if I was born again (I can't quite remember) but I told him I was.

Before he began to pray he put his hands on my head.

I'd had hands lain on my head before. When I was ordained, Bishop James Mace Ault put his hands on my head and pushed down. Then a couple district superintendents put their hands on my head and pushed down. My sponsors put their hands on my head and pushed down. They pushed down so hard I could hardly keep my head upright. I was almost ordained with my head pinned against my chest.

When I was ordained, it was a heavy load.

But when the old preacher in the converted movie theater in West Philadelphia put his hands on my head, he put his around the side of my head just above my ears and he held the weight of my head in his hands. He cradled my head. He took the weight of my head off my shoulders.

As he held my head, he prayed. "I don't know this young man," he told God, "but I know he is a child of thine."

"I don't know the burdens he's carrying," he said, "but I know there is no burden too heavy for you to bear."

And he prayed other things I can't remember.

When he'd finished, I quietly thanked him. I got up and gave the usher the bills in my wallet for the offering and walked out of the church.

You know, in one way, nothing in my life was changed because of that prayer. But in another way, everything had changed. Everything had changed. Since that night, there have still been times when I have not been able to feel or experience or believe much in the presence of God in my life, but I've always been able to feel the memory of that old Pentecostal preacher cradling the weight of my head in his hands.

It is an awful thing to be a Methodist minus a savior.

Perhaps your life is totally together today. Perhaps you've worked out the right balance between work and play and prayer and you've got all the fulfilling relationships you can handle and you are deeply aware of God's presence in your life, then great! Let this Holy Communion we are about to receive be a pure act of thanksgiving for you. Pure Eucharist.

But if you happen to be carrying a burden this morning, and if it feels heavy, don't be a Methodist minus a savior. Let the taste of this bread and wine be a memory that Christ carries your burden with you. His yoke is easy. His burden is light.