

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
July 5, 2026 – The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30; Romans 7:15-25a
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This morning's lesson from the Gospel according to Matthew begins in the middle of a speech. Jesus is speaking to the crowds who were following him about John the Baptist. We need to back up a little to appreciate what Jesus is saying.

At this time John the Baptist was in prison because he had dared to criticize the immoral behavior of Herod, the ruler of Judea. John had heard rumors of what Jesus was doing, so he sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask if he was indeed the Messiah. The message Jesus sent back to John was this: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them" (Matthew 11:4-5). In other words, Jesus' actions were what the Hebrew Bible taught would be the actions of the Messiah. John knew this, so he could draw the appropriate conclusion about Jesus' identity. After giving John's disciples this message, Jesus turns to the crowds and talks to them about John, calling him a great prophet.

Jesus goes on with what I think of as his "if you're a prophet, you can't win with the people" speech. "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" Jesus then teaches the crowd the same message he had sent to John the Baptist: "wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." In other words, look at a person's deeds as an indication of whether or not the person is aligned with God and God's teaching. This is a fairly simple truth, something that "infants" – people who are as innocent and naive as children – can readily comprehend, as we can. We call people hypocrites when they teach or preach one thing and do something else, don't we? The maxim "by their fruits you shall know them" has held true under the scrutiny of theologians and writers about spirituality throughout the years since Jesus' time. As we read in the Letter of James: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? ... A person is justified [– that is, in right relationship with God –] by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:14, 24).

This morning's reading from Paul's Letter to the church in Rome points out, however, that we often do what we don't want to do and don't do what we do want to do. We sometimes have great inner conflict. Paul uses the distinction of flesh and spirit, and the language of sin to describe this inner conflict. We might paraphrase Paul and say that our faith and our higher ideals draw us to one kind of behavior, but what is less than this draws us to other kinds of behavior. By experience we all know this to be true.

Another source of conflict about living a Christian life comes from the fact that we live in a culture that is not uniformly Christian. This was true in Paul's day as it is in ours. For example, Paul writes about the question of eating meat that has been sacrificed to pagan idols (1 Corinthians 10:14-31). What should a Christian do if invited to a meal where such meat is served? Paul advises that a Christian may eat the meat without question because "the earth and its fullness are the Lord's." However, if another Christian person's conscience is offended by eating meat that may have been sacrificed to idols, then out of respect for the other person's concerns, do not eat the meat. The point is that early Christians had to wrestle with questions of how to live by their faith in Christ in a culture where other people did not share that faith.

We cannot help but participate in our culture with all its systems. As many contemporary thinkers have pointed out, these systems frequently involve or are built upon motives contrary to the messages of scripture. For example, we live in an economic system of capitalism. At times and for some people, this has meant greed run wild and exploitation of the weakest, most vulnerable people in our society and in the world. We object to these pitfalls of the system, but how could we possibly withdraw from it, living here? We may, perhaps should, wrestle with the question of how we can participate in this economic system in the most responsible way.

Another example is the environment. We believe that God created our world, that it is good, and that we are meant to be good stewards who protect the environment. There are certainly changes we can make to our way of life that are steps in that direction. We can recycle, we can use less of the world's goods and resources, we can live more simply and generously, and so on. But we cannot divorce ourselves entirely from our culture's way of life. Could you get through a day without using plastic, a week without driving your vehicle, a month without eating food that has been transported great distances? It is virtually impossible for us to avoid participating in a culture that causes harm to the earth. Again, we wrestle with the question of how to participate in the most responsible way.

I want to turn back to the end of today's Gospel reading. Jesus makes this invitation, an invitation that touches my heart and perhaps yours as well: "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." We believe that Jesus is expressing the love of God when he speaks these words.

What about this yoke that Jesus describes? A yoke is a wooden bar or frame that joins two animals together so they can pull a heavy load. The image is an image of hard work. How can a yoke promise rest for those who are already weary? When we are tired and discouraged, we don't want a yoke, we don't want to pull another heavy load.

Jesus invites us to look at life differently. Why are we weary? Aren't some of our burdens caused by our own faults? Human beings rebel against God and turn away from God in countless ways. But God has called us to return, through the prophets and through Jesus. Rebellion against God is not a way of peace. It isn't ultimately easy. God knows that the best thing for us is to turn back to God. So, God calls us back. When we stop rebelling against God, we find that the way is truly easier than the way of rebellion, and the burden is lighter. Jesus invites us to experience this truth for ourselves, by yoking ourselves to him.

Farmers yoke an inexperienced animal with an experienced animal for training. That's what happens when we yoke ourselves to Jesus. We come to Jesus in humility, recognizing that we don't know how to live the way God wants us to live. We need training and teaching. That's why we read about Jesus in the Bible, why we come to church and participate in the Eucharist, why we pray. We need to put ourselves in sync with Jesus. We need to learn his way of life and walk in step with him, walking forward, not backward. When we do this, we may find that it is much easier to do what we thought we couldn't do and avoid what we thought we couldn't avoid than we imagined or feared.

Jesus invites us to work with him, his way rather than our way. Gently, with humility. Day by day and step by step may each of us and all of us together learn to walk with Christ, yoked to him to do the work God calls us to do, and finding rest for our souls along the way. In Jesus' name. Amen.