

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost 2014 Proper 9A  
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Most of you, I'm sure, are familiar with the musical setting of the end of today's Gospel lesson that concludes the first part of Handel's Messiah. Charles Jennens, Handel's librettist, changed the scripture text from first person to third to fit the context of the oratorio, but whether it's Jesus saying "My yoke is easy," or a chorus singing "His yoke is easy," the idea comes across just the same.

You might wonder, though, from the intricacy of the tune to which Handel sets the word "easy," whether the composer actually felt that the yoke of discipleship was actually easy to bear.

And maybe you question the idea as well. The things Jesus wants his followers to do, from feeding the hungry to taking up our crosses and following Jesus may be glad duties, but are they ever easy?

The context of the lesson may help answer the question. The eleventh chapter of Matthew, from which the lesson is taken, begins with John the Baptist's disciples coming to ask Jesus if he really is the Messiah. They've been sent by John, who is in prison, and instead of answering them directly, Jesus tells them to "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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

That’s important. Jesus is focusing on the things that are being done to accomplish the kingdom rather than any titles or authority which he might be given.

He then praises John to the gathered crowd as the greatest of the prophets, and the heir, if not the reincarnation, of Elijah.

All of which is really setting the crowd up for today’s reading, in which Jesus contrasts himself with John.

The crowds that have gathered around him, and around John before him, Jesus says, are like children who can’t make up their minds. When one child says, “let’s play ‘wedding’ and dance in the square,” the other children won’t go along, but when another child says “let’s play ‘funeral,’” they won’t join in for that either.

Jesus then unpacks his metaphor – John, with his call for repentance, is the one wailing the funeral cries, and the crowd doesn’t trust him because in his somber abstemiousness he seems to be criticizing their pleasures and indulgences. But when Jesus says, “let’s rejoice,” the crowd doesn’t trust him either, because of the company he keeps and the way his rejoicing tramples community rules and norms.

What, Jesus wants to know, will actually persuade the crowd to listen to the Good News, if neither solemnity nor celebration works?

You may notice that the verse numbers at the top of the gospel reading in the scripture insert show that a section of this passage has been left out of the lectionary. What is left out is a few verses where Jesus faults the cities of Judea for ignoring the miraculous things that are going on in their midst. It comes right after the part about Wisdom being vindicated by her deeds. I don't know why it was omitted, but it goes like this:

*Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgment it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you."*

Jolly, isn't it?

But Jesus is serious about all of this. God, he says, is going to notice that in a world of joy, of miracles, of healing and feeding and love and honesty, some people are holding out. And even worse, when presented with a vision of what the world might be if it were ordered according to God's purpose, people are still holding out.

There are three possible choices, Jesus says. You can play ‘wedding’ with me – dance, sing and rejoice; you can play ‘funeral’ with John the Baptist – repent, fast and wail, but still draw closer to God; or you can ignore the calls to repent or rejoice, and distance yourself from God.

All three of those choices have consequences. All three of them bring their own specific burdens. But Jesus, in one last pitch to get the crowds to choose the way of life, says, not only is my way the better way, it’s the easier one.

Not that it always seems easy.

Loving your neighbor as yourself can be a terrible challenge, depending on who your neighbor is. Taking up your cross and following Jesus can lead you to be at odds with those you love the most, and even with the beliefs and ideals that define who you are. Forgiving those who wrong you again and again is one of the most challenging things in the world.

In fact, the yoke that Jesus calls us to put on, the burden that Jesus calls us to take up, is only easy in comparison with the other two ways that Jesus talks about.

John’s way, of continual repentance and atonement in the hope of divine forgiveness is a burdensome, weary life. Our faults and failings are never ending, and even when we are mindful and intentional in our repentance, we still fall short

of the perfection of life that ends the need for repentance. Nobody, as the saying goes, is perfect, which means John's path, if we choose it, is unending.

But the other way is even worse. For it is the way of the egoist and the cynic – neither to recognize the need for any reformation of life, nor to recognize the grace that fills every corner of creation, or the forgiveness that frees us from the burden of perpetual penitence.

The yoke that Jesus asks us to take up is the yoke of communion with God and with one another. The burden he seeks to lay upon us is the burden of loving as we are loved. To do so – to follow the example and teachings of Jesus – may lead us to some hard places, but it will not be the yoke and burden of love and forgiveness that will be hard and heavy, but the brokenness of the world that will be hard to bear.

But, and this is the other great promise of Jesus, we will be able to bear it because we never have to bear it alone. No matter the misfortunes we encounter, no matter the sorrows we witness or experience, in choosing to dance the wedding dance with Jesus, we choose to dance in the best of company. We make our journey with Jesus, and we make our journey with one another.

Amen.