

Series: Witness of the Windows

Today: The Yoke's on Us

Text: Matthew 11:28-30

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, October 30, 2011 (Reformation Sunday)

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

History of the Window

Our window this morning is one of my favorites. Perhaps it is because I sit and look at it every Sunday morning before I preach. It is on the west wall, just above the choir loft. It is entitled "*The Risen Christ,*" and it is a picture of Christ standing there with his arms outstretched inviting us to come to him.

The window was the very first of the twelve windows to be installed in 1909 by the studios of Louis Comfort Tiffany. It was commissioned by the Ladies Aid Society of the church as a memorial to the Rev. James Y. Mitchell. The inscription on the window says it was a gift of the congregation, but our history book written for our 250th anniversary clearly states it was the women who made the gift possible. Women are often the ones behind the scenes who make the church work.

Dr. Mitchell was pastor of this church from 1876-1907. Thirty one years of ministry is honored in this window. His service here holds the record as the longest tenured pastor and the only pastor to be memorialized in one of these windows. His tenure marked the first time the church became debt free from its building of this Sanctuary in 1851. He was also the pastor who encouraged the building of Evans Chapel in 1889 which was later razed to make room for our Christian Education Building in 1932. He also encouraged the development of a new church on West End Avenue which we know as Bethany Presbyterian Church. His ministry reflects the growth of Lancaster City in a time of industrial revolution which brought great changes to the life of this city and to the life of the church.

Pastor Mitchell suffered a stroke while preaching in March of 1907. He resigned two months later and died on February 26, 1908. It was at his death that the Ladies Aid Society chose to memorialize

his life and ministry with the installation of the first Tiffany window. The program to install memorial windows was probably in place, and this was the inaugural window to get the program up and running.

The window is based on the scripture from Matthew 11:28-31 which reads: ²⁸ *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”*

Message—The Yoke’s on Us

I always find it amazing the number of places God is speaking to us if we only have the ears to hear. On Friday evening we were standing in the checkout line at Herr’s Market in Millersville. We have shopped there since our years on Bentley Lane, and we like it because it has a feel of the kind of markets we grew up shopping in. It is a friendly place where the staff is stable and you get to know them and they get to know you. Even though there was a line, we were waiting for one of our favorite checkout clerks, and the wait was well worth it. We knew that she was a breast cancer survivor, and her husband was diagnosed with cancer in the spring, but we hadn’t seen her in some time.

The woman in front of us asked the clerk how she was doing, and she smiled a smile that lit up the room. *“I’m doing just fine. Thanks for asking.”* Then the woman in front of us asked, *“And how’s your husband doing?”* She smiled again, but not as bright this time. *“Oh, my! You don’t know, do you? He died in July. Pancreatic cancer took him in just a few months.”* The woman in front of us was visibly upset, and it was the clerk who comforted all of us: *“You know, at the end it was all right. It was as if the Lord healed him and then said, ‘Now it’s time for you to come home.’”* Isn’t that a beautiful statement of grace?

The conversation continued as we went through the line. She wasn’t maudlin. She wasn’t asking for sympathy. She didn’t seem to be in denial. She was honest about missing him, but she was also

honest about not wishing him back. His pain was too great in the end. She was simply testifying to deeper reality in her life where she had found strength and hope and comfort. It was the reality which Jesus articulated in our scripture this morning: ²⁸ “*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*” ²⁹ *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.* ³⁰ *For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*”

How does someone get to that deeper reality which allows us to face the most devastating loss we can imagine and come out whole? I am going to suggest this morning that it is a process which requires practice in the smaller things in life so that we can be ready for the final exam. Here is the process: 1) Go to Jesus; 2) Acknowledge your circumstances; 3) Accept the Yoke; 4) Relax.

Go to Jesus

The context of our scripture is Jesus speaking to people for whom faith was a set of laws; a set of rules and regulations which needed to be followed perfectly before they would experience the blessing of God. Later in Matthew, Jesus says of the Pharisees: *They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders.*” For the faithful Jew, religion was a set of rules and regulations which dictated every action in his life. The words he listened for were not words of grace, but word of restriction. *Thou shalt not* was the voice a good Jew followed.

To these people Jesus says, *Come here. Pull up a chair. Let’s talk.* Can you imagine what that must have felt like to a good Jew who never felt worthy to talk to God; that only the High Priest could talk to God on his behalf. Go to Jesus. It is he who offers the invitation. Take him up on it. Pull up a chair and have a conversation.

I picture it something like the portable GPS system I received a few years ago for Christmas. We call it Gertrude because of her voice. Every time I make a wrong turn or don’t follow her instructions, she says, “*Recalculating.*”

I can't tell you how many wrong turns Gertrude has saved me from making. A few weeks ago I was in Washington DC to officiate at a wedding, and we had to get to the site of the wedding from the hotel. The bride and groom had provided directions, so I didn't even plug Gertrude in, but you know what? I got lost. And after about 10 minutes of trying to figure it out on my own, I finally turned Gertrude on. Now if this thing was a person, I would have fully expected her to say, "*You idiot. Now you turn me on. I could have helped you 10 minutes ago if you would have let me.*"

But Gertrude acted in a very Christ-like manner. After saying, "*Recalculating,*" she said, "*When safe to do so, make a U turn and go to ____ Street.*" U-turns are allowed in a relationship with Christ. Jesus doesn't play "Gotcha" with us. He has issued an invitation. He is waiting for our response. Go to him.

Acknowledge Your Circumstances

Jesus says "*Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.*" There is an assumption here and it is this: All of us are going to be weary and heavy laden at some point in our lives. I am sure Jesus celebrates with us when our lives are going smoothly, but he assumes that there are times in all of our lives when the burdens of life are going to be too much for us. It isn't that he doesn't want to hear from us when things are going well. A word of thanks would be nice. However, when your back is up against the wall and you have nowhere else to turn, Jesus says, "*let me help you for a while.*"

Don't try to pretend that things are going marvelously. Bring you circumstances to Jesus and let him work on your insides so that who you are on the inside will be reflected in the way you present yourself on the outside.

I read the story of a pastor who was going through his first church building project. He and the church's building committee were working with a church architect, and at one of the committee

meetings, he says he learned a good lesson about architecture and theology, something he hadn't been taught at seminary.

In the meeting he asked the architect, "Why do we need such an expensive, high ceiling in the auditorium? We're not building a cathedral. Why not just build an auditorium with a flat roof and then put a church façade in the front of the building?"

In a very quiet voice, the architect replied, "Pastor, the building you construct reflects what a church is and what a church does. You don't use façades on churches to fool people. Façades are for strip malls and carnival sideshows. When you are building a church, the outside and the inside must agree." [Source: *Warren Wiersbe, Be Myself (Victor Books, 1994), p. 104*]

The same is true in our relationship with God. The outside has to match the inside. If our lives are a mess, Jesus says we can be honest about it with him. After all, if we really believe in a God who is big enough to create the universe, who do we think we are kidding?

Accept the Yoke

Jesus goes on to say, "*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*"

The word that Jesus uses for easy can also be translated "*well fitting.*" It is a word which Jesus might have come by naturally. In fact, there is a legend that Jesus, who was a carpenter, made the best ox yokes in Palestine. The idea is that the yoke which Jesus offers is so well fashioned that whatever it is we have to carry won't be a burden for us. On the contrary, the yoke which Jesus makes for us will help us to carry our burdens. It isn't that we will be free of the burden. It will just be easier to manage.

The yoke of the law didn't fit right for many of the listeners of the words of Jesus. It chafed and was uncomfortable. Jesus says to those same listener's that the yoke he will fashion will be so perfect that the burdens it is designed to carry will not weigh us down.

I received a card from a friend not long ago offering me comfort in the midst of a difficult time. It read, "*They say that God never gives us more than we can handle.*" Then you open the card and it says, "*Sometimes I wish he wouldn't trust me so much.*"

Jesus didn't say that we would escape difficult moments in our lives. He promised that if we will allow him to fashion a yoke for the burdens we carry, we will be able to carry them with grace. It will be like the young man I met in Africa last summer who was carrying his brother, who had been paralyzed with polio, on his back. I said to him, "*That's quite a burden you've got there.*" And he corrected me. He said, "*No sir. When I have to walk two miles to fetch water and carry it to my home, that is a burden. This is my brother, and he is no burden at all.*"

Relax

If we go to Jesus, are honest with our circumstances, accept the yoke he fashions for us, the promise he gives in this scripture is that we will find rest; not for our bodies, but for our souls. If we keep trying to do it ourselves, we will be worn out. If we accept the help he wants to offer, we will be refreshed in our spirits, and it has been my experience when we are refreshed in spirit, the body relaxes, as well.

One of the ways I find to relax is the Sunday night symphony. My Sunday night is like Friday night for most of you. The responsibilities of the week are complete, and I can let down for a few hours before the new week begins. Classical music and live symphony are things which minister to my soul.

I found a quote in a book by Michael Card which is attributed to classical composer Franz Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) said: *Often when I was wrestling with obstacles of every kind, when my*

physical and mental strength alike were running low and it was hard for me to persevere in the path on which I had set my feet, a secret feeling within me whispered: 'There are so few happy and contented people here below. Sorrow and anxiety pursue them everywhere. Perhaps our [referring to God being a partner] work may, some day, become a spring from which the careworn may draw a few moments rest and refreshment. [Source: Michael Card, Scribbling in the Sand (InterVarsity), 2002].

Haydn was right. The careworn have drawn rest and refreshment for centuries from the music he wrote with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

So here again is the formula for living a reality which is different than the rest of the world might experience when we deal with overwhelming circumstances in life: 1) Go to Jesus; 2) Acknowledge your circumstances; 3) Accept the Yoke; 4) Relax.

It is a process; a process which requires practice. May you find it a helpful process for your souls.