

Sharing, the Yoke is Easier

The first of five sermons in the Lenten series

“A People of Salt and Light—Jesus’ Model for Community”

by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

February 18, 2018—First Sunday in Lent

- Matthew 11:28-30 ²⁸ “Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. ³⁰ For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light.”
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Jesus invites us to learn side-by-side with him how to honor God with our lives.

A.J. Jacobs is an author and editor for *Esquire* magazine. He wrote one of his books about his experience of reading the entire *Encyclopedia Britannica* from A to Z. Over a period of eighteen months he accomplished that task in order to—as he put it—“learn everything in the world.”

About ten years ago as he thought about his religious background, or lack thereof, Jacobs got an idea for another book. Here’s how he describes it:

Well, I grew up in a very secular home (I’m officially Jewish but I’m Jewish in the same way the Olive Garden is an Italian restaurant). I’d always assumed religion would just wither away and we’d live in a neo-Enlightenment world. I was, of course, spectacularly wrong. So was I missing something essential to being a human? Or was half the world deluded? I decided to dive in headfirst. To try to experience the Bible myself and find out what’s good in it, and what’s maybe not so relevant to the 21st century. [My book] *The Year of Living Biblically* is about my quest to live the ultimate biblical life. To follow every single rule in the Bible as literally as possible. I obey the famous ones: The Ten Commandments; Love thy neighbor; Be fruitful and multiply... but also, the hundreds of oft-ignored ones: Do not wear clothes of mixed fibers; Do not shave your beard; Stone adulterers.¹

Mr. Jacobs’ immersion in the world of the Bible was a curious but sincere attempt to address a question that lives in our minds, too. That question is something like, “How is it possible that we might find relevant guidance for our lives today from a two-thousand-year-old anthology of foreign history and poetry and preaching?”

If nothing else, the situations described in the Bible are foreign to our ears. We are suburbanites. We’re not like the impoverished masses of ancient times who were constantly subjected to waves of military conquest. Our lives are more stable. We have a fair amount of control over where we live and how we support ourselves. We have the luxury of discretionary income to a small or great degree. We don’t live in primitive cities. We don’t farm or fish for our livelihoods. We can hardly imagine what it would have been like to be a shepherd abiding in the field, keeping watch over a flock by night, or plying the lake day after day casting and hauling in and then mending our fishing nets.

¹ <http://ajjacobs.com/books/the-year-of-living-biblically/> accessed 2/14/2018

In today's scripture reading we heard a verse that is familiar enough to many of us. In fact, its familiarity can cause us to overlook the meaning of the metaphor Jesus used in urging people to follow his example for living by putting their trust in God.

²⁸ "Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. ³⁰ For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light."²

Now although I was born in rural Virginia, and as a kid I did read the *Farmer's Almanac*, I'm certainly not a farmer or rancher. But even I know that the yoke Jesus was referring to is the collar put around the head of livestock so they can be attached to a load to be pulled, perhaps a plow or sled or wagon. The yoke is where the puller feels the weight, feels the strain. A yoke is one of the meanings suggested by a stole a minister wears over the shoulders. Jesus likened our daily lives to an animal slogging through the mire, relentlessly pulling to move a weight from here to there. Individually we might be bearing loads such as a lack of self-esteem, or concern for the welfare of someone dear to us, or the physical exhaustion of tackling seemingly never-ending tasks.

But while Jesus knew that people strain daily under such burdens, the load that Jesus was referring to at that moment was something else. He was referring to the burden of religious requirements and obligations put upon people who want to be faithful in the living of their religion. Not only the obligation of obeying the Ten Commandments, as author A.J. Jacobs acknowledged, but the burden of obeying other rules like being forbidden to eat eagles, vultures, falcons, ravens, ostriches, sea gulls, owls, and storks,³ the obligation to make sure your coats have blue tassels on each corner,⁴ the stricture forbidding women to have stylish hair or to wear fancy clothes or jewelry.⁵ Jesus wanted religious practice to feel like a welcome mat rather than an obstacle course.

In our modern, enlightened world, surely burdensome religious rules and practices don't still happen, do they? Let me ask this: in the next few weeks how many of you will take advantage of the Lenten fish fries offered by parishes and schools and lodges and restaurants? Why did they become "a thing?" Because part of the Christian tradition developed a rule that their members would abstain from eating meat on Fridays during Lent. The intent behind this rule was to help believers focus their attention on the bodily sacrifice of Jesus. I'm sure many do. I also suspect that many abstain from eating meat because their church told them to, or because they happen to like fish fries. I also presume that some believers in that tradition simply ignore the rule altogether.

It was that kind of religious obligation that Jesus objected to – practices and rules that, while not bad things in and of themselves, can become obstacles or distractions rather than aids to help believers align their hearts with God's will. You may remember the gospel story of a day when the disciples absent-mindedly plucked some grains to munch on as they walked through a wheat field. Some officials of Temple observed this innocent action and told Jesus "Look! Your followers are breaking Sabbath rules." What rules? You see, harvesting was a type of work that Jewish people weren't allowed to do on the Sabbath, and technically, by removing wheat grains for a walking snack the disciples were "harvesting." But listen to how Jesus responded to the Temple officials: "...The Sabbath was made to serve us; we weren't made to serve the

² Matthew 11:28-30 Good News Bible

³ Leviticus 11:13-19

⁴ Numbers 15:38

⁵ 1 Peter 3:3

Sabbath.”⁶ He was less concerned with whether you complied with a rule and more concerned with whether your spirit was open to being conformed to the grace of God.

Now here we are in a season in the church year called Lent. Just like abstaining from eating meat on Fridays, observing a season called Lent is never mentioned in the Bible. Lent is not a requirement. But this season is offered to us as a motivation to deliberately reflect on the depth of our faith. We’re encouraged to consciously consider how we might bring our lives more in line with God’s will for us.

Jesus proposes a way. He says, ²⁹ “Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. ³⁰ For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light.”⁷

A scholar has suggested that the word Jesus uses to refer to his disciples meant not “pupils” like those who are to learn by watching and hearing, but meant something like “apprentices.” Imagine that for a moment... from [Jesus, apprentices] were to learn not only to *think* and *believe* but to *do*.... As the master of apprentices,

the yoke is not one that Jesus imposes but one he wears! ...It’s as though he’s saying, “Become my yoke mate, and learn how to pull the load by working beside me and watching how I do it. The heavy labor will seem lighter when you allow me to help you with it.” Jesus’ yoke is called “easy.” The underlying Greek word means “kind.” A good yoke is one that is carefully shaped so that there will be a minimum of chafing. Jesus’ yoke will be kind to our shoulders, enabling us to carry the load more easily. In this sense alone his burden will be “light.” Jesus does not diminish the weight of our accountability to God but helps us bear this responsibility.⁸

During this season of Lent we’re invited to discover a different view of what it means to be a religious person. What Jesus offers us is not a vacation from religious expression but a less complicated, less burdensome way of expressing our trust in God. “The ‘easy’ yoke of Jesus is not an invitation to a life of ease, but of deliverance from the artificial burdens of human religion...,”⁹ because Jesus invites us to learn side-by-side with him how to honor and serve God with our lives.

[Sermons: se20180218; © 2018 Jon M. Fancher]

⁶ from Mark 2:23-28 The Message

⁷ Matthew Chapter 11

⁸ Douglas R.A. Hare. *Interpretation – a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching*. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1993, 128-129

⁹ *New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VIII Matthew-Mark*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, 275