Jesus' Rest

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Year A, Sixth Pentecost (Proper 9)
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
Grace Episcopal Church, Pemberton, NJ and St. Martin-in-the-Fields, Lumberton, NJ

"Come to me, all you who are weary and 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." I don't know about you, but I think we all desire rest from time to time. This is especially true today, where we are recovering from a pandemic, living through political divide in our nation, and where we put up with the chaotic demands on our life. In this powerful verse, Jesus promises rest and refreshment. This is something we all long for: the ability to rest in who we are, the ability to rest in how we are made in God's image, the ability to be still and simply know God.

Yet, as we hear Jesus' words, we notice something about this rest. This rest is not passive. This rest does not equal taking a nice long nap or going on vacation and sitting poolside. No, this rest is an active rest. Notice how Jesus says "take" this yoke and "learn from me." These words are action words. This rest involves learning from Jesus; sitting at his feet to absorb and digest his teachings about mercy, love, and grace. Most importantly, this rest means "taking his yoke." When Jesus talks about yoke, he's not talking about the eggs that we eat for breakfast. He's talking about farming equipment. A yoke in this case is a wooden bar or frame by which animals such as oxen are joined by the head and neck for working together. When we take his yoke, we are in a working relationship with him. We are brought close to him. Jesus is not some distant deity who gives us rules and regulations from afar. Jesus wants closeness and connection with us. He wants to work with us and be in a relationship with us.

In fact, the Christian faith is all about relationships. The Christian faith calls us to be in "yoked" relationships with God and with one another. We build these relationships not only to benefit ourselves, but to benefit the world and those we share it with. We live in an individualistic culture where we are told to put ourselves on a pedestal and take ultimate control of our destiny and spirituality. The gospel, however, talk about humble relationships. When "yoked", you are no longer ono your own pedestal nor do you have the ultimate control over your destiny. You are tied to someone else. We are not meant to walk alone or figure out this whole faith thing on our own. This is why Jesus invites us to be yoked with him. In the same way, we can't just tell people about Jesus and walk away, leaving them to figure it all out on their own. We need to build relationships.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and an Anglican priest, would write that "the gospel of Christ knows no religion but social; no holiness but social holiness." What is he saying? He is saying that to be the holy people that God has called us to be, we need to be social and in relationship, being yoked to Christ and to one another. This is the type of rest that Jesus' offers; a rest that is active and interactive with him and with others. When we rest properly, we will receive a refreshment that the world cannot give. Amen.