

Matthew 11:25-30; Romans 7:14-25a
5th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9)
July 5, 2020—Shepherd of the Mountains, Pinetop, AZ

INI

8,712 sq. ft.—66'x132'—0.2 acres. Well, some of that area was occupied by the 1.5 story house with its back deck and front porch. Some of it was taken up by sidewalk and driveway. Some of it was covered by the 2-car detached garage. Other areas were obstructed by trees and bushes and other landscaping features. But the rest of that 8,712 sq. ft. was lush Kentucky Bluegrass.

On a sunny afternoon after work, I could put on headphones to drown out some of the volume of the push mower while listening to some of my favorite music, all while deciding whether to mow in straight or diagonal lines this time. It was relaxing, soothing, mindless work. And knowing there was charcoal sitting in the grill waiting to be lit, a hefty ribeye and some zucchini and asparagus waiting to be thrown on that grill, and also a cold adult beverage or two in the fridge just waiting for the work to be completed, I enjoyed mowing the lawn.

I enjoyed it, that is, until my neighbors decided to mow more frequently, making my lawn look less cared for if I didn't match them...and until I found out about a city ordinance requiring lawns to be kept under a certain length. The ordinance wasn't really enforced. And my lawn was always below that length. But still...knowing I *had* to mow because of my neighbors and the ordinance, and mow with a certain regularity, somehow took the joy out of it.

A subtle transition happens so often. And it's very telling when you notice it coming from others, and disturbing when we realize and are confronted with the behavior in our own lives. The words "I get to" turn into "I have to." And the words "I don't/won't" becomes "I don't get to" or "I'm not allowed to."

We heard about this symptom last week. The Apostle Paul talked about not knowing what sin is apart from the law. The law says things like, "you shall not covet," and our natural sinful reaction is something like, "Covet? Ooh! That sounds interesting! Tell me more about this coveting!"

Whether it's the Law of God or the law of institutions and governments God has appointed, this is our natural reaction. We would be fine with doing something...until the law says you *have to* do it. We would be fine with *not doing* other things...until the law says we *can't* do it. And whether we do or do not do the things we should or shouldn't do, the law always come up afterwards telling us that we did do the things we shouldn't have, or didn't do the things we should have, or that we should have done them better or avoided doing them better, or that our heart wasn't in it as we did or did not do the things commanded or forbidden.

If that sounds a bit confusing, just listen to the Apostle Paul's words this week as he continues this discussion. **"For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."**

If that's not as clear as mud yet, let me break it down a bit more. Basically, our human nature is opposed to the law, any good and just and righteous law. We are so infested and infected with sinful desire, that no matter what the law says, do or do not, our natural reaction is to do the opposite of what it tells us. If we were able to follow the law perfectly, that would be a great thing. But we are not. Even as Christians, even as those redeemed by Christ, we are not able to do it, not able to keep the whole law. So, the law stands in judgment. The fancy Latin term is *lex semper accusat*

and it means “the law always accuses.”

Undoubtedly you have felt as Paul felt many times. **“Wretched man that I am!”** he exclaims in exasperation. Helpless. Weighed down. Burdened. I know I’ve felt this way. The law always demands things of us...things that we are not able to live up to. And we become weighed down by its requirements. With sin at war within us, desiring to do the right thing, even though it is a heavy burden, and not able to do all the things we desire to do as followers of Christ, which is an even heavier burden. And sometimes we feel like asking, “what’s the point of even trying?” **Who will rescue [us] from this body of death?**

Well, as always, the answer is Jesus. **“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord”** Paul rejoices.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus says **“Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, that I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”**

These are words of great comfort for us when life weighs us down. Sure, we can, in a broader sense, think of this invitation as we face various irksome tasks and weighty responsibilities—mowing the lawn, paying bills, helping a friend move, facing a medical crisis, and so many other things. After all, God’s Word tells us elsewhere to cast all our anxieties upon Him because He cares for us. ^{1Peter 5:7} But we can better understand Jesus’ words here in light of what Paul has been struggling with.

Jesus’ invitation stands especially for those who are confronted by the weight of the law, with the weight of sins, with the weight of failure to do, and the weight of the things that should not have been done. When we face *these hardships* especially, Jesus invites us to come to Him...to take His yoke upon ourselves.

It seems counterintuitive to add an extra burden when we are already weighed down. When life is crushing us, when sin is crushing us, taking on a yoke seems like adding insult to injury. And it *is* counterintuitive, and only makes sense when we look at what the work is and who it is that is doing the work. It’s Jesus.

The yoke that He carried was a life of complete righteousness, a life of following the Father’s will without fail, a life of obedience and perfect submission to the law, with all of its dos and don’ts. Only He could fulfill what the Law demanded. Only He could avoid what the Law condemned.

If any one of us had that yoke laid upon us, we would drop it as soon as possible. And as a matter of fact, it has been laid upon us. **“You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect”** Jesus says. ^{Matthew 5:48} And we have dropped it. **“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** ^{Romans 3:23}

But Jesus did not drop His yoke. No, He carried His yoke, pulling all of the burden of our sin. He was nailed to His yoke as He dragged our heavy load to the Father’s throne of judgment. And yet, as the full weight of God’s wrath was poured out upon Him, it wasn’t the nails that kept Him from dropping that yoke, that heavy burden, but His great love for us.

After admitting his own struggles, Paul continues in chapter 8 with these additional words of comfort. **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”** ^{Romans 8:1}

And so yes, you can take comfort in Jesus’ invitation to come to Him and find rest, but also in the part of the invitation that says **“take my yoke upon you”** because the work has already been done and done perfectly for us. We have been freed by the Gospel to strive toward doing the good works that we should do. And, we have freedom in the Gospel from any weight of condemnation for what we have failed to do. So, we delight in the law of the Lord. And we rejoice in Gospel of Christ crucified and risen for us. Amen.