

14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – July 9, 2017  
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

47 years ago this week, my family moved to a new home in Pennsylvania. This was a very rural part of Pennsylvania. The road on which we lived was gravel. There was never much traffic.

Our closest neighbor – let's call him Mister B - had some farm land that bordered our own. Mr. B did not raise any crops – he raised sheep. As we found out later, his sheep were very good at finding their way through the fences, onto our lawn, and into my mother's garden. Mister B also had some cows, some goats, and a few ducks.

On the very first night that we were in our new home, we discovered that Mr. B had two more animals. He had two donkeys. We had not seen them as we moved in. But at about 5:00 AM that first night, we HEARD them. The two donkeys started braying, loudly, before sunrise, and they kept making that awful noise until they were fed at around 6:30. They would start going, and the noise would echo down the valley.

Later that day, I saw Mr. B, and I asked him if these two, loud donkeys had names. And he told me that their names were – are you ready? – “Comfort, and Joy.”

Trying not to sound like a complaining neighbor, I asked him why he had donkeys in the first place. And he explained that he had an old, mechanical sickle bar. It's a kind of farm implement which he used to cut hay. He would put a yoke on Comfort and Joy, and using that yoke he would hitch the two donkeys to the sickle bar, and cut his hay.

Now I was only 8 years old, but even I knew that a modern tractor could do the same job, and tractors did not start making noise at 5:30 AM! But I did not say that to Mr. B!

Well, those donkeys ruined my sleep for most of that summer. I even began to pray that God would take them to donkey heaven. So imagine my guilt when, late in August, Comfort died. Only Joy was left.

When I saw Mr. B a few days later, he was in the process of loading the old sickle bar onto a truck. When I asked him why he was getting rid of it, he said, “this weighs too much for just one donkey to pull it. Joy can't do it on her own. And besides,” he said, “the yoke I have is built so that the two of them could walk side by side. This yoke won't work if only one tries to wear it.”

*This yoke won't work if only one tries to wear it.*

In today's Gospel, we hear some of the most consoling words in the entire New Testament. To a group of people who were burdened and weighed down by all of life's worries, Jesus says,

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are 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.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Scripture scholars tell us that, in this section of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is trying to draw a distinction between himself and the religious leaders of his own day. The religious leaders of that time had told people that holiness was a hard thing. They told people that God was most pleased when we followed lots of rules.

We've all heard about the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. But by the time of Jesus, there were over 600 commandments that people had to follow if they wanted to be 'Holy.'

For many people, Religion felt like a burden. "Pleasing God" had become a task SO HARD AND HEAVY that it felt like a yoke, a harness, placed upon our shoulders.

But Jesus comes along, and in effect he says – holiness is not as hard as you've been told! Serving the Lord brings COMFORT, JOY and FREEDOM. Faith should not feel like a heavy yoke on your back. So Follow me. Let my Gospel be the yoke upon your shoulders, and you will find that it's easier than you might expect.

Most of us don't use a yoke at home any more. But, remember how Mr. B used to put a yoke on the shoulders of Comfort and Joy? And because that yoke was being worn by two of them, they were strong enough – together – to carry a weight that they could not handle on their own.

And maybe that is another aspect of what Jesus means when he says "Take my yoke upon you." Could Jesus be telling us that his yoke was designed for TWO, not just one? Is it possible that Jesus is telling us that we will only get through life, we will only carry our burdens, if we realize that he is walking right beside us, carrying the burden with us? That he is wearing the yoke along with us?

True, we have to wear the yoke – but I like think it's a yoke built for two. And the Risen Savior is the one who wears the other part, and carries more than his share of the weight.

In recent weeks, I have encountered so many people who are burdened with the terrible weight of life, struggling with the heaviness of what's happening. And let's face it – we often have to carry life's burdens right through to the end. Christianity is not a religion where our God promises to take away every struggle, or miraculously fix every difficulty.

But we do have a God who says, "No matter what struggle you're facing, I will walk through it with you, right beside you. And no matter what heavy burden you are carrying, I will wear that yoke with you, and help you carry it."

We are carrying heavy burdens. I know a man in his 50's, a man who appears to be in perfect health. He recently found out that cancer has grown throughout his body, and there is no

treatment which will cure him. Heavy burdened.

Recently, I visited a couple who have been married over 60 years. She is in hospice care, facing death. He is facing life without the love of his life. Heavy burdened.

We watch the news, and hear about shootings at home, terror abroad, refugees seeking safety, political turmoil. Heavy burdens.

In recent weeks, I met a man who had just lost his job after 23 years with the same company. I talked to a woman whose husband left her for another woman. I talked with a daughter whose mother is showing signs of Alzheimer's.

None of these burdens will magically disappear. But I also know this – none of these burdens can be handled if we try to carry them alone.

Perhaps that is why Jesus says, “Come to me.” Come to me, and we'll walk through this, together. Come to me, and we'll carry the weight, together. Come to me, and we will both wear whatever yoke life brings. Come to me, and I will gently lead you to a place where you can find rest in the Living God.

Come to me. Not only will I help you carry the burden, I will lead you to a church, a family, a community, where others will wear the yoke with you, and walk beside you, and give you peace. And you can walk beside others, helping them to wear their yokes. You can give strength to those who are burdened!

His yoke is easy, because he wears it with us. His burden is light, because he carries it with us.

So stretch out your arms in worship today, open up your hands in prayer today, and take on the yoke of Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, you will discover the One who walks by your side. And in him, you will find both comfort, AND joy!

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