

3 July 2011
Pentecost 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“The Easy Yoke of Jesus”

Text: Matthew 11:25-30; Romans 7:14-25a; Zechariah 9:9-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever felt burned out?

Perhaps your work has burned you out. You've been pushing hard for a long time, there's no end in sight, and you're just sick and tired of the whole thing and want a vacation.

Or maybe it was school. You get on that treadmill at the beginning of the semester, and there's no stop button. In fact, it just seems to keep getting faster and you can't seem to keep up.

Or perhaps you're just burned-out on life. The trials and struggles never seem to end, and one day melts into the next. You can't seem to muster enthusiasm for much of anything, and even the fun stuff just seems kind of ordinary. Been there, done that.

It happens to everyone.

But what about when it comes to church? To religion? Have you ever been burned out on religion? It happens all the time - actually more often than you might think. People burn out on religion. They start out all gang busters, on fire for the Lord, but they can't keep it going. At some point it just kind of settles into a dull glow and eventually burn-out.

Back in the 19th century, after some of the great religious revivals and awakenings that were happening, they noticed this: burn-out. They even referred to the areas where this was happening as the “burned over” districts, as though a religious wildfire had raced through the area and burned the population out on religion.

But that's not just a thing of the past. It can happen again. It can happen to you. And maybe it has. You hear God's Word and are lit on fire! You're gonna keep them commandments, read your Bible, have family devotions, pray, talk to people about Jesus, do good, give to charity, come to Bible study, help others, forgive abundantly

- all good stuff! But how long do you last? How long before the flame starts to die down? A week? A month? It's not that you don't want to do it. I know that you do. But I know that you fail. And the harder you try, the more you resolve, it just seems the harder the fall - true? And like Paul, you wind up saying, "**Oh wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?**"

Then what often happens is that we settle. We settle for a Christian life that really isn't much of anything. If we can't do it, we'll just, well, live in the middle and hope for the best in the end. So try not to hurt anyone, mind your own business, be nice to animals, recycle, give to charities. Beyond that . . . ?

Is that the Christian life? So vanilla, so plain, so the same as your next door neighbor who may or may not be Christian? If so, no wonder churches are declining. And if that describes you, I know this: you don't want to be that way. You know it's not supposed to be that way. You want to do better.

So what do you do when the things you do are the very things you hate, and the things you want to do you don't? What do you do when you find, as the apostle Paul did, that whenever you want to do good, evil lies close at hand? What do you do when your mind delights in the law of God and truly wants to serve it, and yet your flesh simply refuses to cooperate - setting you at war within yourself?

The answer from today's Gospel is this: **You come to Jesus.** Hear that invitation and take it to heart. "**Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.**" Especially if you're an old, experienced Christian who thinks: *I ought to be able to do it by now!* Jesus wants you to come to Him, especially when you are tired, burned-out, and feel unworthy. That's why He came to us, born of the Virgin. That's why your king came to Jerusalem **humble and mounted on a donkey.** That's why He comes to us now through the Word and the sacraments. He wants us to come to Him with our burdens, our burn outs, all the heavy lifting we try to do. *He wants to give us rest.*

It seems so basic, doesn't it? So simple. Come to Jesus, trust Jesus, let Jesus shoulder your burden. And yet . . . we don't, and so burden ourselves needlessly. Why? If Christ bore your sins on the cross, why are you trying to bear them yourself? If Christ bore the burden of your shame and guilt in His death, why are you trying to hold on to these things?

For in truth, this is why Jesus came: to save sinners. To save you. To save miserable you, wretched you, multiple-failure you, I-can't-seem-to-ever-get-it-right you. To give you rest. The rest that you need. The rest that you cannot live as a Christian without. The rest of the forgiveness of your sins.

And so when Jesus says “repent,” He doesn’t mean straighten out your life, or get your act together, or clean up your own mess. *He means that He wants to bear your burden for you.* The burden of your sin.

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden [with sins],” - come in repentance - **“and I will give you rest.”** The forgiveness of your sins.

Take these words to heart. They’re from Jesus, the One who knows the Father and received all authority in heaven and on earth from the Father and who died and rose from the dead. His Word is sure. And then He says . . .

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” Now, to have a yoke seems the opposite of rest, and the truth is we’d rather not have any yoke - thank you very much. But that’s not an option. So we need to learn about yokes. And you know the thing about yokes? They’re never for just one person. It’s not that you have yours, and you have yours, and I have mine - they don’t work that way. *You’re always yoked to something or someone else.* Yokes keep pairs of oxen together. The only question is: who are you yoked to?

Well, by nature, we are yoked to sin and death; yoked under the Law. But Jesus wants you yoked with Him. **“Take MY yoke upon you,”** Jesus says. And the picture to put into your mind is like a little kid walking next to his older, much bigger brother. They’re both under the yoke, but at the same time they’re not - because the bigger, older brother is bearing the burden, shouldering the load. The little brother gets to walk along, and the big brother smiles.

And so instead of being yoked to the Law, with its heavy burdens and obligations; instead of being yoked to sin and satan, who only want to oppress you and kill you; Jesus wants you yoked with Him, so that you walk along side Him as He carries the load of the Law for you, and carries the burden of your sin for you. That’s why **His yoke is easy and His burden is light** for you. Because He’s bound Himself to you in love.

No wonder Jesus prayed to His Father here with these words and said, **“I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.”** To His little brothers and sisters. For little children trust the words you say to them. Intensely. Immediately. They hang onto them and don’t let you forget them! *They believe what they hear.*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, little brothers and sisters of Christ, believe what you hear. Repent. Lay down that heavy yoke of Law and sin you’re trying to carry yourself. **Come to Jesus.** He is gentle and humble of heart. He’s not a rule-giving

tyrant, but your Saviour, Shepherd, and Redeemer. His interest is not in what you can do for Him, but **in you**. He wants you. He wants to forgive you and have you under His yoke with Him - under the wood of the cross - where all your burdens are borne by Him.

Come to Jesus. Come to Him in His Word, and hear what He has to say to you. He wants to reveal the hidden things of faith that the wise and the religiously smart won't get. Come and listen to Him the way a child listens, trusting, holding on to those words that are Spirit and life and faith-creating and faith-sustaining.

Come to Jesus. Come to Him in Baptism. You are baptized but once, but baptism has a daily and lifelong effect in your life as your baptism includes the promise of forgiveness all your life. A water that cleanses not just once, but always renewing and refreshing your weary soul weighed down by sin and guilt and shame. There is those waters is a loving Father taking his dearly loved son or daughters in His arms.

And then **come to Jesus** in His Supper. He wants to refresh you here in a most unique way, giving you living bread, His body, and the wine of gladness, His blood. These things seem so ordinary to the eye and so difficult for the intellect to grasp. It is inconceivable how a bit of bread and a sip of wine on a Sunday morning can mean anything for the burdens of the week. And yet there, too, Jesus says ***"Come to me."*** *He knows what's good for our souls.* And coming to Him here we find that refreshment - that freedom; freedom from sin - that can't be found anywhere else in this world.

That's a freedom even greater than the freedom our country is celebrating this weekend, and for which many people come to our country looking for. For it is not just for some, but for all. Not just for a time, but for eternity. And it has been given to you. That you may walk with Him - not in sin and selfishness, but in forgiveness and love; not to death, but to life; not burdened, but set free. Set free to bear one another's burdens, for Jesus is bearing yours.

And that's no vanilla, plain, same-looking Christianity. But a life of confidence and hope, peace and joy, that can only be from Christ. That enables us to say with St. Paul: ***"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"*** For *His yoke is* is easy, and His burden is light.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

(Thanks to Rev. Wm. Cwirla, whose sermon on this text I have liberally used and adapted.)