

**Saint John's Cathedral**  
Denver Colorado  
Sermon for July 9, 2017 ~ Proper 9A  
The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

A yoke is a piece of wood fashioned to join two animals together for the purpose of bearing a heavy load, or to fit on the shoulders of a man or woman either to lift a burden or to bind them in slavery. The words of Jesus in this passage call to mind all of these meanings. What sort of man would tell an already tired and overburdened people to take on his yoke and bear another load? The same sort of man who died on a cross saying that by his action and his death the world might have life. The same sort of man people have called Lord and Savior for over two thousand years. We are standing face to face with the paradoxical nature of Christ's life and message.

His invitation to wear his yoke is extended even to us who worship here today. He says to us if life is a burden, he has a yoke that will help us to bear the load with joy and peace. So if you believe all this, or want to believe it, and would also call him "Lord and Savior," then the yoke's on you!

**The yoke's on you when you commit your life to Jesus Christ. It is the yoke of commitment.** For many people, commitment implies limitations on their freedom. A chicken and a hog were walking down a country lane together. They passed a little church that had a sign on the front lawn reading, "support your local church." The hog remarked, "you know, we ought to do something for that little church." The chicken agreed, saying, "yes, perhaps we could raise some money for it with a ham and egg breakfast." The hog replied, "that's easy for you to say; for you to give a few eggs would be a contribution, but for me to give a ham would require a total commitment."

We've heard that joke a thousand times and it's corny, but it helps illustrate my point. What we tend to do is give God the leftovers of our lives. We are yoked to the fear that if we give the best we have, what is left won't be sufficient to sustain the lifestyle to which we have become accustomed. Christ comes to exchange that yoke with his yoke.

**The yoke's on you when you have heavy burdens to bear. It is the yoke of comfort.** Jesus knew that there are times when life itself is a burden. And even in a time like this he said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." The Greek word here translated "easy" means well-fitting. In Palestine, the wood was carved out in the carpenter's shop to fit the one for whom it was made. So, when Jesus says "My yoke fits well" he is saying, "The life I give you is not a burden to gall you; your life, your task, is made to measure for you." Bernard of Clairvaux expressed this truth when he said, "O blessed yoke that bears the bearer up." And so it does.

When we wear Jesus' yoke, we see our burdens in a new light and they are easier to bear.

**The yoke's on you when you are trying to do something about your neighbor's burden. It is the yoke of service.** Jesus has sent his disciples out to bear the burdens of others for two millennia. Somebody always needs our help, like the people who will reside at St. Francis Apartments at Cathedral Square North, or those who sleep in Dagwell Hall on a Women's Homeless Initiative night, or those whose hunger is assuaged through the Loaves and Fishes food drive with Metro Caring. When they asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" he told a story of a compassionate Samaritan who bound up the wounds of a stranger by the side of a road. Then he turned the question around and made neighbor the subject rather than the object, "whose neighbor are you?" His yoke

enables us to be neighbors to others who are bearing heavy loads; the frightened, the sick, the hungry, the confused, the lonely, the ugly, the oppressed, the strangers. And when you care about these and try to do something about their needs, as your youth are doing this week on their mission trip, then the yoke's on you.

**The yoke's on you when you are trying to make important decisions about the future. For it is the yoke of hope.** Your long transition between settled deans is about to be completed as your new dean arrives next week. Our time together is drawing to its conclusion. Your new dean will arrive next week. After a time of rest and recreation at our Texas home, we'll be heading to Jackson, Mississippi where'll be the interim dean of St. Andrew's Cathedral.

These months have been filled with progress in the work of transition and in preparation to receive a new dean. They have been a blessing to Gay and to me. And Richard Lawson's time with you will be a blessing to him and his family. Getting to know you and this beautiful community has enriched and changed our lives in important ways. The same will happen with Richard in his years with you. You have made a place for us and extended generous hospitality to us. And you will do that for Richard as well. You have allowed us to care for you and to guide you through some challenging adjustments. Richard will want to be able to do that also. We hope and pray that our time together has also enriched you and changed you in ways that will make it possible for you to consecrate yourselves to a new era of ministry with your new spiritual leader. What an opportunity! What an adventure this is going to be! Gay and I have reserved seats in the bleachers and will be watching in anticipation and cheering you on with a great cloud of witnesses as you continue to do great things for God and your neighbors as the leading Episcopal Church in Colorado. We are yoked in hope with one another and with Jesus Christ as the future unfolds.

The Wardens and Vestry, this amazing staff (many of whom are young enough to be my children), my clergy colleagues, Bishop O'Neill and his staff, the committees, guilds, ministry groups and their leaders, the Liturgical Ministers, the Musicians, the children and youth, the Eucharistic Visitors, and, of course, last but not least, the exceptional coffee, make Saint John's a holy community of people in the Episcopalian branch of the Jesus Movement. Perfect? Of course not! But you are steadily moving in that direction, toward maturity in your faith and in your life together. You are growing spiritually and the fruit of that is evident. As Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16).

I want to encourage you to continue and I also appeal to you today to do even more in expanded engagement and funding in endeavors that bring hope and meaningful change in the mission field at our doorstep, in advocacy that addresses wealth inequality, housing, racism, and injustice, and in continued efforts to strengthen the spiritual health and quality of your life together. This is the heritage of the People of God.

God does most of the work. That's the hard part for us. It's about grace. It's about trusting God to change us so we can change the world. We'd rather read a self-help manual and fix ourselves up. But the truth of the gospel and the good news of the gospel is that God does most of the work. The Church is here week after week to remind us of that. How can we experience this lifelong process of mental revolution that can impact the evil forces of this world, such as poverty, racism, and injustice?

Desire it. Admit that you can't save yourself or save the world by yourself. Believe that the One who is greater than you can transform you. Continually turn your life and the life of your Cathedral over to him. Believe that the best years of Saint John's Cathedral in Denver are in the future God is setting before you.

That One, Jesus Christ, is here to meet us at his Table. Whether our attitude is right or not, he is always here. But when we come desiring, admitting, believing, surrendering, when we are as receptive and trusting as children, when we receive him in this way, it is the first step in the journey *from* slavery – to the past, to hurts, to disappointments, to prejudices, to the way we've always done it – *to* the glorious liberty which is the destiny and the inheritance of the children of God. You don't want to shortchange yourself.

I remind you one last time – Those doors open outwards and so do your lives. What happens in here is to equip and empower us to be the Body of Christ out there. We receive Word and Sacrament so that we might become Word and Sacrament in a world of hurt, of today and tomorrow, not that of yesterday. And, the good news for this Cathedral community is that God still has a unique mission for you that no other faith community has been called to serve in this part of Creation. Freely you have received. So freely give. Don't hold back. God will be glorified, that glory will be reflected in your life together, lives will be transformed, and you will become the change that changes the world!

So, your new dean, who was elected during prayer in this very room, is on his way to you. I know you will receive him and his family with the same radical hospitality and extravagant generosity you have extended to Gay and me. As I think about this church in this verdant valley, blanketed by beautiful flowers and foliage, teeming with life, and nestled against a wall of mountains, the words of a hymn come to mind. We sang it the night your vestry chose Richard Lawson as dean. They describe God's Church as a beautiful, fragrant, and fruitful garden. I want to share it with you in closing, with a heart that is grateful for the privilege of living in this garden with you for awhile and a prayer that your continuing ministry will indeed bear delicious, nutritious, abundant fruit:

Christ hath a garden walled around,  
A Paradise of fruitful ground,  
Chosen by love and fenced by grace  
From out the world's wide wilderness.

Like trees of spice his servants stand,  
There planted by his mighty hand;  
By Eden's gracious streams, that flow  
To feed their beauty where they grow.

Awake, O wind of heav'n and bear  
Their sweetest perfume through the air:  
Stir up, O south, the boughs that bloom,  
Till the beloved Master come:

That he may come, and linger yet  
Among the trees that he hath set;  
That he may evermore be seen  
To walk amid the springing green.

To echo the Collect of the Day, I pray that God will send you the grace of the Holy Spirit that you may be devoted to God with your whole heart and united to one another. And, remember, the yoke's on you!