

## AN INVITATION LIKE NO OTHER

As I mentioned earlier, my family and I have been regularly attending this church since 2015.

What I have yet to mention is that this is the first church I have ever truly been a member of, and prior to that time I had very little practice or study in Christianity. Candidly speaking, I never thought I had much use for it in my own life.

The church's dogma that I had grown up around in a small, predominantly Irish Catholic town south of Boston never instilled in me any passion or desire for more; it actually had the opposite effect. I became convinced that religion in general, especially the Christian teaching to which I was exposed, was based on magical principles not grounded in the natural world and was lacking in the kind of personal relationship which I always strived to obtain and which provided the meaning and connection that in essence served as a substitute for a relationship with God.

As a kid and then in college and young adulthood, I often wondered:

1. Do I even believe in God?
2. Have I ever?
3. Was Jesus real? And
4. Was he just a man or something more?

I have struggled for most of my life with these questions and with the limits and rules of what I believed Christianity was. It was not until I came here, listened to Bruce's message, and took part in retreats, a Disciple Band, and the other important disciplines ... that my mind started to expand and open up to a new way to not only live my life but to have a personal relationship with God, for which I am truly thankful.

Prior to that time, I had spent years diligently trying to outthink the concept of God and instead chose to rely on my own construct of spirituality. This focused primarily on trying to be a good person and to treat everyone as I would want to be treated. This is actually funny since, as I sat down to write this sermon, it dawned on me that one of my core tenets, i.e., The Golden Rule, is very much credited to the teachings of Jesus.

For example, in Luke 6:31, Jesus preaches to *“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”*

In that small example I realized how aligned my own beliefs were to the important teachings of Jesus, which then surprised me to ask:

1. Have I been a Christian all along?
2. If so, when did that happen and why didn't anybody let me know?
3. How did this happen without me consciously acknowledging this fact?

Well, I do believe that my own “rational mind” and lack of real humility effectively served to blind me from recognizing where my heart and soul had already ventured.

So as I take pains to reflect on my own life pre-Community Church, I'm sure I thought that things were going okay. As a young child I had accepted and adapted as my mother struggled to survive after having a stroke and a lifetime of disability. I had lived through the passing of my dad's father, with whom I was very close. And a year after Kathy and I were married, we had to witness both my mom's father and my younger brother, Matthew, who was 25, pass away within just months of each other.

As people do, we somehow found the fortitude to press on, so I wonder in these times ... where do people find the strength and resolve to keep on going in the face of grievous personal loss?

Well, I certainly didn't know. I just seemed to find a reservoir of perseverance which enabled me to swim back to the surface and to live day by day.

And, life moves on ...

The loss of my father last year after a cruel and extended fight with cancer was extremely difficult for me to cope with. Based on my past upheaval, I would have thought that my established methods of coping would see me through. Instead, really for the first time, the compounded life experiences of interpersonal grief, stress, worry and let's call it fear made me feel like I was being stretched way too thin, translucent and unrecognizable to myself and feeling lost without a rudder to steer me to calmer waters.

Outwardly seeming okay but internally drifting, my own creation of spirituality in which I was the Captain of the ship was not only not helpful but revealed itself for what it really was: a flawed human's way to deal with life without a basis in truth or in substance.

During this period of struggle, not at all by chance or coincidence, it was during one of our retreats that it dawned on me that what I had cognitively interpreted as my own ability to control my life and all around it was in error, and that it had always been the grace and patience of God which had gently nudged me out of darkness and back into the light. All those times when I wondered how I was ever able to keep going was answered at this time. Turns out, it was never just me trying to do it alone.

What an amazing and transformative realization it was and still is for me to know that I was never far from God, that his spirit and healing strength were always there for me, and that by applying the tools and relationships I have learned from Bruce and many of you here today, I am no longer in charge and my boat now has a much better Captain.

I never said it out loud, but in that moment I realized that I was simply sick and tired of being the Captain and having to take on the impossible task of controlling virtually everything that had an impact on my life. I was not very good at it; I was exhausted and *needed* rest. Not sure if anyone else here today has ever felt that way, but it was good for me to acknowledge that truth.

I think it was this self-admission that finally humbled me to the degree where I could finally catch up to the place my heart and soul were striving to reach and were waiting for me to join. I really do love the Scripture for today; it obviously speaks to me and what I have described and am striving to live in my own life.

Read it again: *“Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, 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.”* (Matthew 11:28-30)

In doing some research to prepare for today, I found a lot of commentary that verses 28 and 29 are seldom given the same weight, and that to many the messages seem to contradict one another. While the first verse seems to promise that Jesus will give you rest, he then proceeds to place his own yoke onto you.

So people wrestle with the question: Why would a person who is already weary and burdened with life's difficulties volunteer to take on the yoke of Jesus?

How weary is Jesus? With his constant ministry, healing and travel, his yoke must be infinitely heavier than mine. At *first glance* I can see why somebody would question whether taking on Jesus' yoke would be such a good idea. However, upon a second glance, as usual there is a lot more here than meets the eye.

So what are we to learn from Jesus? My belief is that he is inviting us to "*Come unto me.*"

This is an invitation, an earnest plea, to come at once. It's interesting that the kind of people we read about who were following Jesus were not only poor and needy but also burdened with the guilt and responsibility of following the laws of the day. The inability to adhere to those many rules and the potential of being ostracized from the Jewish community would place a heavy and terrible burden upon one's soul. I think these realities speak to the context of the new and powerfully uplifting message being delivered by Jesus.

When Jesus talks about "rest," what does that mean?

1. Is that a promise to take away life's troubles?
2. Is it an invitation to be lazy?
3. Is life now going to be free of pain and loss?

I know some people would like to believe this, but it is not what I have observed or what I think God has ever intended for us.

In verse 29, Jesus uses the very real example of a yoke to teach us what he means. A yoke is a piece of wood carved out so that it will fit upon the necks of two oxen to enable them to carry heavy loads. In many areas of the Bible, a yoke is often associated with bondage and slavery. Jesus and the general population of his day obviously knew this, so why did he use this as his example?

I have also learned that yoke-making was a skilled craft and that good yokes were made of strong wood that could be made smooth. Any areas of roughness or that were ill-fitting to a specific animal could cause skin irritation and muscle damage to the animal. The yoke would have to be expertly sized for the team it was made for.

If the yoke was too small, the animals would injure each other; if it was too wide, the oxen would be ineffective in sharing the load.

I think what Jesus was trying to tell us is that he is an expert at making yokes for us and that when you are yourself yoked with Jesus and he is pulling with you, he has you fit with a yoke which is perfectly crafted for you to walk through life together.

As if to make the point, the verb “yoked” can also mean to join, unite, couple or link, certainly a much different perspective than bondage or slavery.

I think one should look at the use of the word “yoke” as an invitation to move from the old ways to a new promise. One wherein you enter into a partnership in which the spirit of God promises to share the load, help you with problems, guide you to peace, and allow you to not only find your vocatio but to have the joy and energy to fulfill it.

Also in verse 29, Jesus asks us to learn *from* him and not learn *about* him. Is there a difference? My basic thought is that learning facts about Jesus will not change our lives, but knowing him in a personal way will.

Jesus invites us to know him and reminds us that he is gentle and humble in heart, where one can find rest for the soul. This invitation promises not to abuse you, hurt you or condemn you, because Jesus’ nature is forgiving and kind. The rest you will receive is for your soul and not from the worldly struggles of existing as we all have to do. The promise of this invitation is that if you will seek Jesus in your daily acts and disciplines, you will find relief from burden and you will find spiritual rejuvenation.

As I tried to understand this concept, I couldn’t help but think of Ebenezer Scrooge waking up on Christmas morning and realizing that the heavy and burdensome chain of greed, loneliness, pain and guilt that he had labored under for many years had been removed from him and that even old Scrooge could be rescued and renewed.

Those wonderful scenes in Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* where Scrooge is transformed, relieved and giddy with joy with his newly found second chance are how I envision the promise revealed by Jesus when he invites us to join him.

*“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

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I presume the yoke is easy because we are sharing it and because you have permission to give up control to God. My brief but enlightening experience with this concept is that when you are yoked or aligned with the Spirit, you cannot go in another direction or at a different pace. God sets the direction and he sets the pace. Even more remarkable is that anyone can accept this invitation at any time. It is open to all who would accept it.

In Revelation 3:20, it says: *“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and dine with him, and he with me.”*

I have decided to accept this invitation and, while it takes discipline for me to truly embrace my relationship with God, I now am sure that this has been the right path for me from the beginning.

As I mentioned, Jesus ends this bit of Scripture by exclaiming that his yoke is easy and his burden is *Light*. Life is easier when aligned with the Spirit, and it is not only lighter in weight but is also light in the form of energy and joy that come from releasing control and putting your trust in God.

By accepting this invitation, what do you have to lose except the burden of being the Captain, adrift on a rudderless ship?

Let us pray:

Dear God ... Thank you for your patience in accepting us even when we turn our backs on you. Thank you for your vigilance and guidance when we have not even asked for it. And let your Spirit fill this church so that we may have our burdens lifted. Amen.