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"Yoked"

Genesis 24:34-38,42-49,58-67 Psalm 45:10-17 Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS 24:34-48

We've seen God's promise to Abraham and Sarah result in the birth of a son Isaac. This week we pick up the story of Isaac when he is a grown young man. Isaac's mother Sarah has died and Abraham determines that it is time for Isaac to find a wife. Abraham instructs his servant to go to the land from which Abraham came and find a wife for Isaac. The servant does as instructed, and when he gets there in prayer he asks God to show him which woman is the one God wants Isaac to marry. He asks that the first woman who responds to his request for a drink and offers to water his camels will be the one. The first woman he meets who fulfills these requirements turns out to be Rebecca, the daughter of Abraham's brother Nahor. Hear the words of Abraham's servant from Genesis 24:34-38. 42-29. When Rebekah's family heard Abraham's servant's story they called for Rebekah. Read 58-67.

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 11:16-19; 25-30

Prison tends to make people doubt, especially those on death row. Jesus' cousin John, whom we call John the Baptist, is in prison and has heard about what Jesus has been doing and sends a message from prison asking Jesus if he really is the Messiah or should he look for another. Jesus responds with an encouraging message to John and then launches into a praise of John as the greatest of all the prophets. In verse 16 Jesus laments the fickleness of the generation to whom he and John came with God's message of the kingdom. Hear the word of God from Matthew 11:16-19 and then 25-30.

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In my early Christian days, it was common in the circles in which I ran to talk about not wanting to be "unequally yoked." As best I can remember I think it came from Bill Gothard Institute of Basic Youth Conflicts Seminars. (Looking back after 40 years of marriage I wonder how I ever took the marriage and family advice of a man who never married and still lived with his mother.) Gothard's seminar warned against Christians dating non-Christians for fear that they might fall in love and get married but because of differences in the practice of their faith they would be "unequally yoked." In fact, he preached against dating altogether, insisting that marriages should be arranged by the fathers, much like Abraham's sending his servant to find a wife for Isaac. If I had employed that method I probably would never have gotten married. I don't think Anne's father would have sent an employee looking for a Seminary student.

While I can't seem to find the phrase "unequally yoked" in scripture, the principle is demonstrated in Abraham's desire that his son not marry a Canaanite woman.

Abraham wanted his son to be yoked with a daughter of the same tribe and culture and faith. (but a first cousin?)

In our gospel lesson, Jesus laments that folks that were of the same tribe and culture and faith could not grasp the message that he and his cousin John came to bring. Jesus described them as acting like children who complain when people won't follow THEIR lead! They complained when they wanted to play the flute and be joyful and celebrate and John wouldn't join them. They complained that when they wanted to mourn and wail that Jesus partied with folks that were not their kind of people. And yet, there were infants that got it. Jesus said the wise ones of this world were stumped but the "infants" in the ways of the world caught on to who John and Jesus were and what they were about. Then Jesus invites his hearers to come to him. He invites them to not listen to the generation of complainers. He invites them to not listen to those who claim to be wise in this world, but to listen to the infants to whom God has revealed who John and Jesus are. Jesus says that those who come to him will be truly free.

Last Tuesday there was much talk about freedom. Our nation observed a holiday celebrating our Independence from being "unequally yoked" with Britain. It is said that King George wrote in his diary, July 4, 1776, "Nothing of importance happened today." Well, we think something of importance happened, and we are grateful that it did.

We may celebrate freedom FROM England, but true freedom is not only freedom FROM, it is freedom TO. We celebrate freedom FROM England, but it is also a Freedom TO be the United States of America. As Christians who have been forgiven through the grace of Jesus Christ we celebrate freedom FROM sin and the freedom TO serve. In Jesus we are freed from being unequally yoked to sin and freed to be yoked to Jesus and to followers of Jesus TO serve others in his name and share his love with others.

Jesus calls us to enjoy the freedom of being yoked to him and to one another. "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

The stress on people today has been well documented--particularly those with families. There are many people today working full-time on the job and then working just as hard off the clock meeting their responsibilities at home.

Few emotions take a toll on us like worry does. Author Stephanie Stokes Oliver in her book, Daily Cornbread, asks whether we are worriers or warriors?

Worriers let their anxiety and fear interfere with living their life to the fullest. They manifest their worry in physical symptoms like headaches and knotted muscles. Worriers seem unable to take control of their situation and make a positive change for themselves.

Warriors, on the other hand, find healthy ways to deal with their fears. They don't automatically shut down and go into crisis mode. They trust that God will sustain them. Warriors take positive action to change a negative situation. (1)

Kim Bolton tells of a workday that many moms can relate to. She looked around at mounds of unwashed laundry and un-mopped floors, and she silently dedicated herself to a day full of cleaning. And just as she was getting into a cleaning rhythm, her two-year-old son called to her, "Hey, Mom, why dontcha come and sit wif me in da big chair."

Kim protested. She tried to explain how busy she was. She promised to sit with him later. But he continued to smile that charming smile and pat the chair next to him. Finally, Kim put down her laundry and settled into the chair with her son. The two of them snuggled for a minute or so, and then her son patted her on the leg and said, "You can go now."

Kim was a worrier. In a hectic day, her young son insisted that she take just a moment to rest with him. He understood her busyness, but he also understood that their time together was more important to both of them. In that moment, Kim Bolton said her two-year-old boy was an example of Jesus to her. (2)

Astronaut Jim Lovell is a warrior. In a news conference he was asked about Apollo 13. He was in command of that spacecraft when it experienced an explosion on its way to the moon. With their oxygen almost gone, their electrical system out, their spaceship plunging toward lunar orbit, it appeared Lovell and his crew would be marooned hundreds of thousands of miles from Earth.

Lovell was asked, "Were you worried?" Such an obvious question drew snickers. But then Lovell gave a surprising answer. "No, not really." he said. "You see, worry is a useless emotion. I was too busy fixing the problem to worry about it. As long as I had one card left to play, I played it." (4)

People who allow worry to overwhelm them will often complain of fatigue. Fatigue, they'll tell you, is why they do not do anything about their situation. ( Maybe the song by Bobby McFerrin song should have gone, Don't Worry, Get Busy! )

Friends, you may be weary because of your work. You may be weary because of worry. But some of us are weary more because of what is happening in our brains than what is happening in the workplace, or in the world. Negative thoughts will drain the life right out of you.

Are you weary this morning? Weary from work? Weary from worry? Weary from guilt or fear? Hear again the words of Jesus, "Come to me, all you who are weary

and burdened, and I will give you rest. Come experience the freedom of being equally yoked.

I've been a city boy all my life and so I've not had much experience with yokes. From time to time Anne takes me to these historical places where we see re-enactors living like folks used to live. On one of these adventures I actually saw a man working with a yoke of oxen. He pointed out how it was important to match a pair of oxen. They needed to be the same size and the yoke needed to be tailor made to fit their necks.

Being a carpenter who worked with wood Jesus knew that a well fitting yoke was easy on the animal and that it made the animal's work lighter and easier than one that didn't fit. Jesus calls us to come to him and take him on...to follow him and that as we do so with others in ministry the load is lighter because it is shared. Jesus says, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." It's still a yoke. Work is still involved. It's not take a seat in my recliner and I will give you rest. It's strap on and let's work together in partnership with your other brothers and sisters and we'll make light work of it.

We have work to do. This week we had a special guest at our Bay Area Ministerial Alliance lunch. The Rev. Charles Johnson is the pastor of the Bread Church in Fort Worth, and the Executive Director of Pastors For Texas Children. In the last 4 years since he founded this organization he has had over 400 meetings around the state with pastors. The goal of P.T.C. is to join with churches to help and support public education.

He reiterated that he honors the diversity of religious expression in our state, and emphasized that his organization is in no way seeks to "bring religion into public schools." He said however, that people of faith take that faith with them wherever they go, including into public schools. The mission of his organization is to work with churches to pair them with public schools to help those students succeed. He described their focus is in 2 areas: ministry and advocacy. He acknowledged the good that churches do for children all over the state through their varied ministries, but emphasized that State policy affects our children too. He sees the Holy Spirit marshalling people of faith to work for establishing good policies for children through our public schools.

He stated that 90% of children in Texas will be educated through Public Education. Yet, the funding level for Public Education has not increased since 2006 levels. In 2006 schools were funded at 70%. Randy O'Brian, the Superintendent of Goose Creek I.S.D. was at the meeting and he said that Texas now funds Public Education at 38%. Rev. Johnson pointed out that often times teachers spend money out of their own pockets for school supplies for their students. He lamented that there are some pushing the mantra that public education of the 90% is failing in an attempt to promote vouchers for the private education of the 10%. He expressed his deep concern that the legislature

promoting vouchers for 10% of Texas Children who can afford private education versus the 90% of children who cannot.

We have work to do. This week I saw an article that said that 59% of millennials who were raised in the church have left the church. That's not young people that have never been the part of a church family. Those are children that we once had within our family and have left. The article shared 12 reasons why they have left and ways that churches can work to reach out to draw them back.

We have work to do. This week I saw a report that said that 80% of people who do not attend church responded that they would if someone asked them. It also reported and only 2% of church members ever invite anyone to come. Since 2009 over 30,000 churches have participated in "National Back To Church Sunday." This year it will be observed on September 17. Maybe we need a "Come to Jesus Meeting" about how we can reach out to that they can "Come to Jesus." I hope we will take advantage of it and use this opportunity to move beyond the 2% who will ask someone to "Come unto Jesus all who are weary and are heavy laden so they can find rest for their souls." If we succeed... who knows, maybe they will even decide to be yoked with us and go back out and invite even more to find rest for their souls. Our Commitment and Finance Committee is working hard to reduce the cost of doing ministry. We are making good progress. In addition I think we as members can work on increasing the reach of our ministry.

Jesus calls us to not only celebrate Freedom From being a Colony of another Nation, but to celebrate the freedom to SHARE God's love with other NATIONS. We've a story to tell to all nations and all nationalities that live in our nation. Jesus calls us to celebrate freedom from the bondage of SIN and enjoy the freedom to SHARE God's love. Jesus calls us to move from complaining to commitment. Jesus calls us to come to him even if we are in a dead-end job or we think we're too busy to "come and sit wif me in da big chair," to come to him and find rest for our souls. After we find the rest for our souls however Jesus promises to go with us as we find work for our hands and in so doing find true peace that comes from experiencing the freedom of being equally ... yoked.

Let's pray. We hear your invitation, Lord. Come. Rest. It sounds so appealing. However, our burdens demand our full attention, dominate our thinking, and sap our resources. The more we focus upon our own troubles, the more depressed we become. There are moments when we are free, when we experience peace and joy. Then we allow ourselves to slip back into the same old frame of mind your invitation is clear: Come! Rest! Come share the load with others. Lord, lift us out of our self-concern and focus our attention upon your word of life. Help us to find rest for our souls. Amen.

1. Stephanie Stokes Oliver. (New York: Doubleday, 1999)

2. Kim Bolton with Chris Wave, *Finding God Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, compiled by Lil Copan and Elisa Fryling (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1999), pp. 134-135.