

Hospital regulations require a wheel chair for patients being discharged. A student nurse found one elderly gentleman already dressed and sitting on the bed with a suitcase at his feet, who insisted he did not need any help to leave the hospital.

After a chat about rules being rules, he reluctantly let her wheel him to the elevator.

On the way down, the nurse asked him if his wife was meeting him. "I don't know," he said, "She's still upstairs in the bathroom changing out of her hospital gown."

First some background on this text. The Greek word used for EASY is CHRESTOS, which means WELL-FITTING. So we are talking about a well-fitting yoke. In Palestine, ox-yokes were made of wood; the oxen were brought to a carpenter, and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then roughed out, and the oxen were brought back to have the yoke tried on. The yoke was carefully adjusted, so that it would fit well, and not irritate the neck as the animals worked. The yoke was tailor-made to fit the oxen.

There is a legend that Jesus made the best yokes in all Galilee, and that from all over the country people came to him to buy the best yokes that skill could make. In those days, as now, shops had their signs above the door; and it has been suggested that the sign above the door of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth may well have been: "My yokes fit well." (Barclay, MATTHEW, p. 17).

In other words, Jesus' yoke isn't necessarily a 'piece of cake' – a lite-beer religion – but it is the RIGHT-FITTING ONE FOR US. We also would do well to remember that a yoke doesn't make the weight any lighter, it simply makes it possible to haul a heavier burden. The life of Christ which we bear as a sweet yoke enables us to have a more meaningful – thus easier – or BETTER FITTING life to live.

Second, it's no secret that we live in a high-stress culture. Suicide rates and drug and alcohol addiction are at all time highs. Technology was supposed to make our work easier, and even to make us work less. This has not been the case at all. We have overstuffed schedules and hectic lives – a seemingly endless series of appointments and chores that consume us day and night, robbing us of sleep and health, causing us to miss too much of the laughter and joy with those who matter most to us.

All the technology we possess now makes us work pretty much all the time. I remember when the parish administrator in one of the parishes I served offered to set my computer up so that I could get my work email at home. He suggested that I could then work from home. I said "Why would I want to do that? I work enough at work!" It's work creep – if we are not careful we are working literally pretty much all the time. And it can make us feel VERY VERY IMPORTANT! Look at me! Look at how many hours I work! How could the world ever survive without me? All important ME!

Drop dead, and the next minute someone else has taken our place. The President dies and we get a new one in minutes with a vice-president sworn in. The Pope dies and we get a new one in a couple weeks with some holy smoke. We are all SO replaceable, despite what we may think.

We need a word of grace from God for our weary souls. Because all this running around causes us to neglect our inner lives, distracting us from the nourishment and care of our souls. And as we may have noticed, if we have just returned from vacation just as exhausted as the day we left, tired souls need way more than a nap, or a vacation, or retirement. We need the refreshment that Jesus offers our souls.

"I will give you rest," Jesus says. Sounds great. It's good news that Jesus knows, and cares, about our weariness. When we are worn out, we dread most a boss, or coach, or friend who responds to us with a pep talk or a scolding. "Just suck it up, when the going gets tough the tough get going, don't quit, do you think you are the only one who is working hard, don't be lazy..."

But Jesus offers no such trite counsel. He does not trivialize our weariness. Instead, He names it for what it is, embraces us with His words, and invites us to find rest in Him. He does not accuse us of procrastination, or laziness. He does not blame. Jesus simply offers Himself like a strong shoulder, to lean against. He understands that we have simply fallen prey to one of the most subtle tricks of Satan. For if the devil cannot make us bad, he will settle for making us too busy. Looks like he's doing a great job in American culture.

Third, but while Jesus offers us rest, He also offers us a surprise gift for our weariness. He offers us a job. He offers us rest, yes, but then invites us to take His yoke, to go back to work. If we think the rest Jesus offers is a long retirement sipping a drink watching sunsets, think again. What He offers is an alternative to the exhausted lone ranger, to the heroic person who thought they could do it all, to the supermom or workaholic company man who is at the end of their strength, buried under a never-ending to-do list. The gentle rest Jesus offers is not a hammock, but a summons to strap a yoke over our shoulders, an instrument for pulling heavy loads. We want to say to Jesus, "Thanks, but no thanks." But this is not a trap, or a joke. Jesus invites us to rethink HOW we do our work, HOW we live our lives. He offers us the way of a SHARED yoke.

Now if we did not grow up on a farm, we might not know that a yoke allows a person or animal to carry a huge amount of weight, balanced over the shoulders. But a single yoke still exhausts the shoulders after a while, causing the need for frequent stops. A double yoke, on the other hand, allows 2 people or animals to pull together, allowing one to rest while the other bears more of the load, and then vice versa. A double yoke allows more than twice the work to be done, and requires less downtime. When the day is done, both are tired, but neither is exhausted. And what is more, with a shared yoke, we have company, conversation, partnership. With a shared yoke we can encourage each other, and rejoice in the results of the labor together. Partners in shared yokes say words like 'we' and 'us' a lot, instead of the inherently exhausting language of 'me' and 'I.'

So Jesus offers us rest, but He also wants us to be productive. He just wants us to learn a wiser way to work. He is not an efficiency expert from the factory trying to get us to accomplish more. He is offering us a parable of how to live, to labor, and to love. Life was designed to be shared, to be celebrated together. Like making a bed in the morning, 2 is better for the task than one. It is the same with preparing and eating a meal, or working a task. Finding companions instead of fighting competitors is the beginning of our quest for fulfillment in our labor.

So take a good look at the offer of Jesus. He gives us so much more than just a pillow or a vacation. He offers us half of a shared yoke, and the wonderful rest of knowing that it is Jesus Himself who pulls the load from the other side of the yoke. Amen. (freely adapted from GRACEWORKS, 9 July 2023)