

Syzygus\* (9July17)  
Matt11:16-19,25-30;

Romans7:15-25a

I want to start with Show-and-Tell.

The strips of fabric I wear are called stoles. During my ordination service at my home church, Trinity Lutheran in Eau Claire, one was first placed on me by George Carlson, my bishop at the time, and by Annie Engebretsen, who was chair of my first call committee. So the stole began to serve as the main visual representation that I am a pastor.

But in that, like a lot of things about being a pastor, it has a built-in paradox: a stole is the sign of being a pastor, but at the same time is symbolic of what applies to all of us. That's also true of my alb, this white robe. ("Alb" comes from the Latin word for "white") (like Albus Dumbledore's white beard in Harry Potter). My alb looks like special clothes, since I'm the only one here wearing it, but it's also supposed to symbolize that all of us are washed clean in baptism and put on newness in Christ and match the saints described in the book of Revelation.

Again, I get to splash around in the font and declare that your sins are forgiven. That isn't because I have special magic powers as a pastor, much less that I'm especially faithful or brilliant or eloquent. It's just because you hired me to say those words to you, so that you could guarantee you'd get to hear what really any of us can and should say to each other, stuff like "God loves you. Jesus is with you. It's not the end. You're forgiven." I don't have claim to those words by virtue of being an ordained pastor (again, it's certainly not grounded in my virtues at all), yet paradoxically I have special opportunity to announce grace, to put on a white robe, and to wear this stole.

The reason I describe this is that when the stole was placed on me, it was with the words from today's reading: "Come to me, all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." This stole represents a yoke placed on my shoulders. Again, while realizing that Jesus wasn't talking exclusively to future pastors, still this vestment had me contemplating what Jesus meant. What is light about this? And why is it still a burden?

As a snapshot of this yoke's role, I'll tell you that I was up north at the start of the week at a high school friend's cabin. It happened to be her daughter's 5<sup>th</sup> birthday party, and amid the balloons and piñata and ice cream cake, I was also taking advantage of the wifi to check messages from church. It could be argued that it's standard for our 24-7 world these days to mean always being plugged in. I'll say (for those of you who might be concerned) that I don't think I'm overly distracted, not excessively tech-bound. That burden felt light; I was still able to enjoy friends in the northwoods. But it would be the wrong burden, anyway; being captivated by technology and our communication cycles is not likely the yoke Jesus wants.

So maybe another difference is in confessing *why* I was on my phone. The burden isn't merely having lots to do, since long hours don't inherently make it Jesus' Kind of work. For me, that moment on Monday had me worried about sick family members and struggles for housing resources and I was deliberating worship details and how to enliven Bible stories and overall pondering what benefits I could offer physically or by speaking God's good news into those circumstances of life that range from desperate to mundane.

In short, I was focused on you. Since you are my work, I'd say that means (in the language of this Gospel reading) that you're my burden and

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\* the "yokefellow" from Philippians 4:3

I'm carrying you with me most everywhere I go. Or to say it more fully, we are each other's burdens. And not just us here, but others too, as we were reminded with the Dane Sanctuary Coalition press conference this week: we've discerned that we need to bear others of our neighbors who are facing special threats in these days. We find ourselves indentured into service for them.

Having that sense of service and Jesus' work, though, I should stop to admit something else. It's a bit self-promoting when I try telling you that I was working and focused on you up north at that birthday party. It's harder to tell you stuff that doesn't fit with your image of a pastor, which might be that I was drinking beers from 11:00 that morning, or that besides asking about you the friends also asked about one of my tattoos, or that that self-indulgent little getaway used a heckuva lot of gasoline, or that I probably wasn't doing well in balancing my responsibility to Acacia. And those still leave out unspoken not-so-pure details that I should be able to trust and confide, but am uncertain of the words and am chicken. They leave me doubting myself whether I'm fit to be your pastor, the insidious traps that minds chase after.

You may rightly say that if there's no virtue that enables me to be a pastor, there should be no vice that would exclude me. But fears of what disqualifies from God's love and blessing hound and haunt. Honest moments face and recognize I do not do what you want, what I want, what I should. In gloomier times I wonder whether I can do anything right.

The solution for that is not to look on the bright side. Such self-confidence can be dangerous. Indeed, the term means placing faith with the self, with a paired risk of ignoring or mistrusting God. As those who are reading *The Screwtape Letters* are reminded, it is tricky and

demonic when blinders prompt us self-assuredly to imagine our thoughts and concerns are so positive and benevolent and yet leave us failing to notice the malice and lack of charity really present in our daily life (eg, p28).

This is exactly the wretched assessment in Paul's words from Romans. They are a loooong ten verses zeroed in on the perception of my individual circumstances, of being worse than I wanted. Finally when Jesus shows up to set things straight at the end, I'm surprised to find I've been desperately gasping for breath in longing for him. Really this passage is small potatoes, since the last we heard from Romans was that you were already dead to sin, and living only to God in Christ Jesus. Whatever struggle there is has already been declared won for God.

Having Jesus back in the picture returns us to an earlier question of service and his work: he tells us to take up his yoke. So where in this image is Jesus? I'd suspect the obvious thought would be that he's the plowman driving the team, the farmer who has hitched up the oxen to do his work and plow the field. That probably squares with a view that the whole world is God's estate and property, God's creation that needs tending, the expanse of God's garden. We may picture ourselves as beasts of burden to serve God, directed by this plowman Jesus as our boss.

But the yoke metaphor isn't portraying Jesus behind you holding the reins. Rather, he uses the image to emphasize two necks paired together, side-by-side through the bows or loops of the yoke, and (if I understand what was probably already clear to the original listeners), a new ox was paired with an experienced one. So the ox working with you and teaching you is...Jesus. Jesus is your yokefellow. In this image, then, he's not saying that he's a nicer master who will spare the whip and make sure

you're well-fed. He's saying he's working with you, keeping you straight, leading you into his way that is gentle and humble and offers rest.

And if it culminates in sabbath rest, this is also a word about the work that you do as God's creatures. Rather than "my burden is *light*," it should be translated "my burden is *better* or is *fitting*." The workload Jesus offers is more natural and fitting than the burdens you otherwise choose for yourself or get roped into. It's natural and good that we should be dependent on service to each other, that we honor the relationships of creation. Caring for each other is the fitting way for us to live. Selfishness and reckless gain and ignorance about others around us instead create cycles that continue to make life more difficult and restless. We see it in exploitation of immigrant workers. We see it in environmental abuse. We see it when we neglect time with our families and end up requiring more effort to sort it out later. Even though we recognized with Romans that we end up at those dead ends, that is not God's intention for us.

Jesus continues to speak of burdens since it's right that we're bound together. While we may react at first to this passage against the yoke, wishing instead to be set free, that's a wrong model of freedom and of life itself. As our society celebrated the American form of independence this week, I'm disheartened how that's framed that as freedom *from* others, as in "you can't tell me what to do." That is essentially a nonexistent impossibility. We must exist in relationship. We fit most naturally when we attend well to shared needs and demands.

For that, I'm so grateful for the yoke-mate Jesus. You aren't left to navigate God's work on your own, not of your own devices trying to plow good and straight lines. In your roles, it's not whether you worry about feeling good enough, since the natural fit comes from Christ.

And when the unnatural threatens and your doubts and distractions arise and you so constantly seem to stray toward the evil that you don't intend, nevertheless Jesus your yoke-fellow remains to work beside you, to guide your steps into the way of life. We might say he's pulling for you.

So even the invitation to take this yoke upon you is a bit of a misnomer, since Jesus has already yoked himself to you, as Immanuel, as God with you, born into your life, to take your suffering upon himself, who remains with you always. Jesus your yoke-mate will guide you, by your side in love, and that presence ensures the burden is light, good, and natural, and culminates in rest. That's who you're supposed to be amid God's creation, and—in the concluding words from Romans—it happens, "thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!"