

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME—2017

With our modern day high tech farming, not too many people have actually seen a pair of oxen joined together with a yoke, plowing a field. The purpose of the yoke is to make the work of the animals easier by making sure that the oxen pull together in the same direction. It makes the job go faster and much more efficient.

In one of the most comforting and consoling passages of the Gospel, Jesus invites us to go to him with our burdens and our restlessness. He invites us to take his yoke upon our shoulders. While at first glance the idea of a yoke seems to imply something very confining, difficult and limiting, the yoke of Jesus actually makes things easier and is very freeing.

The Greek word for easy also means well-fitting. In Palestine oxen yokes were made of wood; the oxen were brought in, and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then roughed out, and the oxen were brought back to make sure it fit correctly. It was then adjusted so that it would fit well and not injure the animals. The yoke was tailor-made to fit the oxen.

There is a legend that Jesus the carpenter made the best yokes in all of Galilee and that people would come from all over the region to buy the best yokes. Some even say that above the door of Jesus' carpenter shop was a sign that read: "My yokes fit well." There is a good chance that what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel was something that came out of his personal experience as a carpenter.

What does it mean that the yoke of Jesus fits well? It means that our life with Jesus is not meant to be burdensome and that our relationship with Jesus is something very personal and, we could say, tailor-made, the way the yokes were made for the oxen. It means that we walk with Jesus and with others, all going in the same direction.

When Jesus says that his burden is light, it doesn't mean that it is easy to carry but that the burden laid upon is the burden that comes from loving God and others. Sometimes we might speak of love as a burden, in that, when we love someone, sometimes it is difficult and challenging, but it is also something life-giving and life-sustaining. When we are called to go beyond ourselves because of love, it is something positive and doesn't drag us down.

We all have experienced that when we truly love someone, there is no task or burden too difficult or heavy or too apparently distasteful. To do something for someone we love makes us happy and fulfills us. It is in this same spirit that Jesus invites to place his burden of love upon our shoulders. When we love someone and we are called to be a care-giver, we don't mind doing even the most apparently uncomfortable of things. It is the love that I have for that person that makes that particular burden lighter.

It is important to remember that Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon our shoulders. He never forces us to. He basically invites us to love him and follow him and his direction. It means that we walk with others who have answered his invitation to them to follow Jesus.

The image of the yoke also presents us with something that is an essential part of what Jesus tries to

get across even though he doesn't mention it specifically. In our relationship with Jesus we are joined together with each other, working toward the same goals and going in the same direction. We could imagine how difficult it would be for the farmer to plow the field with the oxen not joined together. Imagine trying to plow in a straight line. So it is in our call to be in community, whether it be our families or our faith community. What joins us is our loving commitment to Jesus and the value and dignity that we give to each other. It is out of these relationships that we will come to a common focus and work together to achieve that common goal of bringing people together and reaching out to those who need our help.

At the beginning of the Gospel Jesus says that what he offers us does not come from book learning or intelligence. The truth that Jesus offers us is not complicated; it is a very simple truth. That doesn't mean that it is easy to live out, but that it is meant for everyone. The way to this truth, as Jesus continues, is through our relationship with him who in turn points us in the direction of our Father. It is in our closeness to Jesus and truly knowing him as our friend and brother that the love of God is revealed to us.

The invitation today is to bring to Jesus whatever burdens and restlessness we have and to accept his loving yoke, that is, his loving embrace and together, with those around us, to work together to create the opportunity and real possibility that all people can live together as God would have us do.

Last week I was on a four-day retreat and had some time to reflect on my seven years with you. While at times it has been challenging and difficult for all of us, the most difficult thing has been that the majority of you have presented me with the challenge of the faith. Most of you have shown me what it is to be a person of faith and to live that faith in the reality of life. Again, that has been the most difficult challenge for me. Without words, you continue to motivate and inspire me to look at my life and see what I have to do to become more a person of true faith. It is one thing for me to stand before you and preach with words. It is another thing to preach by example. Perhaps not everyone can preach with words, but we can all preach by example, as St. Francis teaches when he says, "Preach always and, if necessary, use words."

You have called to me and have invited me to be a man of faith, a faithful brother of St. Francis, and a priest who is a true disciple of Jesus. I continue to pray, work and strive so that my true preaching not be these words which I speak but my life as I live it in the reality of this community with which God has blessed me in a most wonderful way. And so, please continue to challenge me by your example, prayerfulness, dedication, and participation here at St. Francis. While truly challenging for me, it has also been a most precious and important part of my time with you.

And so, let us walk yoked together; may our hearts be more open to the presence and Spirit of Jesus, the Spirit of life. Let us remember always that God is always with us in our daily lives. With that common focus and direction, what we have been able to do today will seem so little compared to what we can do in the future. "St. Francis said, while we have time, let us do good, for up to now, we have done nothing." And that's no yoke.