

**First Congregational Church, UCC
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
July 5, 2020, 4th of July Weekend**

Rev. Dr. Jessica McArdle

Title: Replenished Souls in Dark Times

Text: Matthew 11:16-30

Matthew 11:16-30

11:16 "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

11:17 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

11:18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon';

11:19 the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

20 Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.

²¹Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

²²But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

²³And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

²⁴But I tell you that on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.'

11:25 At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;

11:26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

11:27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

11:28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

11:29 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.

11:30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Opening song and prayer:

Will you pray with me, beginning with song?

May your word, O God, be a lamp unto our feet,

And a strong cord of courage for your many peoples.

Holy One, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts, always be acceptable in thy sight, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Introduction:

In the waning days of August, 2005, a tropical depression was forming over the Bahamas while tracking west towards southeast Florida. However, this activity wasn't unusual given the time of year. If anything, locals talked about and prepared for these storm-related events as long as anyone could remember. But within a few short days, meteorologists observed ominous signs. [1]

For one, the scope of the storm system itself was massive, extending from Texas across the southern states that bordered the Gulf of Mexico to Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Florida. Winds that had been clocked at eighty miles per hour, soon accelerated to one hundred seventy-five, gaining intensity over the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

As observers watched the impending storm, they realized that what they were witnessing was on a scale never seen in their lifetimes. This was a Category Five storm. Named Hurricane Katrina, the cyclone's fury centered on New Orleans and its surrounding areas. As the New Orleans levee system gave way, the subsequent flooding destroyed the area and proved deadly for resident and creature alike.

Nearly a year later in 2006, our church launched a week long mission trip to New Orleans. Our aim was to continue the demolition and rebuilding efforts that other church groups and disaster teams were engaged in. Due to toxic molds and other hazards, it would be necessary for those working in previously flooded and now abandoned homes and other institutions, to wear full protective gear. Others on FCC's team were tasked with building structures to support housing vehicles and machinery needed for the continued cleanup.

Though I had seen footage and read reports about the expanse of the devastation upon New Orleans and its surrounding areas, nothing could have prepared us for what we would witness. Though a full year later after the actual catastrophe, huge swaths of areas were still reeling from the disaster. Whole city blocks were decimated. Shopping malls, grocery stores, hospitals, clinics and schools, along with apartment buildings and houses ravaged by the flood waters remained as eerie ghost towns, in scenes reminiscent of the cityscapes in apocalyptic movies like 28 Days Later or I am Legend. Unsalvageable automobiles, were piled up under freeway overpasses, mangled boats were adrift in what remained of abandoned wharfs, and everywhere we looked, we saw desolation alongside gripping inequality. Those most affected by the storm's scourge – were in the Lower Ninth Ward, a black neighborhood and community. Years before the wetlands that would have safeguarded the community from massive flooding had been dredged in favor of industrialization, thereby destroying the fragile ecosystem and the community's natural protective barrier from rising water levels. [2] What we couldn't even begin to gauge – was the

disaster's impact on the people - especially in those areas hit hardest and whose scars would take the longest to heal.

Refrain: But even still, the risen Christ replenishes our souls for dark times.

Move to scripture:

In today's passage from the Gospel of Matthew, the last verses are among the most beloved in scripture, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.

We need to hear these words now. As the death and infection numbers associated with the global coronavirus pandemic continue to spiral upward, particularly at home here in the US, as months of separation and physical distancing continue, as grave injustices inflicted on our brothers and sisters of color continue to be magnified, as health care workers & first responders continue to bear the burden of this virus, as economic hardship and poverty inflict the most vulnerable amongst us, as ecological devastation continues and our democracy endures continued assault – the grief and the fear

and the anxiety as to what the future holds has taken its toll. A weariness has settled over the land and her people.

When will those who suffer injustice and deprivation, who are broken, scarred and shattered by violence, and whose very lives are in the balance, find rest? When will there be rest for anxious and tired souls? (pause)

In agrarian societies, such as in Jesus' day – a yoke would have been made of wood, hand carved to fit the neck and shoulders of farming animals to prevent pain or discomfort, as for a team of oxen. Likewise, religious authorities in Jesus' time, used this same word as a metaphor, such as taking the yoke of the Torah and thereby accepting their rabbinic interpretations as your own.

Trouble with scripture

Yet there is a problem in today's scripture.

When comparing verse twenty-eight with verse twenty-nine of Matthew eleven, the two verses come off as contradictory. For instance, in verse twenty-eight, Jesus calls out, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Does this not sound comforting? Does this not sound like the Jesus we know and love? But then in verse twenty-nine, Jesus changes course saying, "Take my yoke upon you

and learn from me." When hearing these verses alongside one another, we may ask, "Why would a person who is already weary take on a yoke and thereby be additionally burdened?"

When I was growing up in southern California, the central gathering place for family was in the kitchen – which was separated from the rest of the house by cabinets and a narrow wall. On this wall, my mother hung her collection of humorous plaques. For instance, on one such plaque and in recognition of my mother and father's many years together, it spoke of the challenges of being yoked (or paired) to one another in marriage. The plaque said, "When tempted to criticize your spouse's judgment, think twice. After all, look who they married." (pause)

Within this morning's text, Jesus intentionally used the word, YOKE, to unpack a word commonly used in his day. And why Jesus went to such lengths to unpack it, was because he wanted to be very clear. There is the yoke we're asked to take on as Christ's followers that leads to replenished souls, **while in contrast**, there is the yoke that subverts and even crushes God's intentions for humankind and creation.

Which explains why in the previous verses of today's passage, particularly in verses twenty through twenty-four,

Jesus fiercely denounces those whose self-serving priorities subvert rather than live into the Gospel. Though harsh sounding to our modern ears, Jesus used such rhetoric in order to drive home why it is important that we ask ourselves, “Whom will I serve?” “Whose yoke will I accept?” For as the divine culmination of Mosaic law and God’s grace and power...

Refrain: the risen Christ replenishes our souls for dark times.

Trouble in the World

In other words, Jesus’ teachings in this passage directs our attention to trouble in the world because injustice is a domineering yoke and a means of subjugation. An account in the Old Testament records low-wage workers imploring their ruler for relief from harsh, slave like labor, saying, “We beg you to lighten the heavy yoke of hard labor upon us.” [3]

Likewise, the prophet Jeremiah said to a false soothsayer, “In place of a wooden yoke upon the people, don’t you realize that now upon their weary shoulders is an iron one.” [4]

Refrain: Indeed, the replenisher of souls’ demands that God’s people be released from the yoke of oppression. (pause)

As people of God, we find ourselves in the wake of one of the most tumultuous and I would add, dangerous periods in our recent historic memory. There is trouble in the world, and in

our nation. We are in the grip of a fearsome viral outbreak that continues to escalate, and a sense of powerlessness has taken root in our very souls. Among our elected representatives are those who have drifted away from the ideals of the Founding Fathers, who—across the woods and farmsteads that lie barely a few miles from our homes—took on a noble cause and bore great sacrifice to champion this boldest of democratic experiments. The current climate of fear, mutual suspicion and discord has left us broken and diminished as a people. And the struggle for full emancipation for people of color, indigenous people, immigrants, LGBTQ folk and those in the grips of poverty remains as urgent as ever, even as they valiantly push forward against the odds.

Yes, there is trouble in our land and in the world, and with it, substantial and unrequited grief. A crippling despair for lives lost but who cannot be mourned, for jobs derailed that won't be recovered, for educational opportunities and rites of passage that have been thwarted, and for all the times and so many ways this pandemic has separated and isolated from those dear to us, and whom we love. Indeed, there is trouble in our world and in our nation. But because we are people of

God we will not pretend otherwise, nor will we be content to stand on the sidelines.

God's Answer in Scripture:

So, what is God's answer to our weariness and despair in these dark times?

To begin with, the yoke that Christ asks you to accept, was uniquely created just for you. Born of his love and ultimate sacrifice, it's not meant for anyone else, not your spouse, co-worker, boss or brother-in-law. Uniquely corresponding to your temperament, your experience and most importantly, your calling, what the Beloved One of God gently rests upon your shoulders affirms the love and trust God holds for you. In other words, as writes one pastor, "Jesus' yoke is a kind and pleasant phenomenon. It is not a despised thing but is as gentle as when someone you love lays his or her hand on you to encourage you, to love you, to lead you gently and lovingly up those hard and rocky paths to where you should go and to that peaceful, verdant place where you can flourish." [5]

Refrain: Indeed, Jesus replenishes our souls, to be God's witnesses in dark times.

God's answer to the World

What if God-in-Christ intends for us to be a part of the answer to the problems of our nation and our world? What if the gentle and humble in heart, Beloved One of God, needs each of us, needs you, to be a replenished soul in dark times? What if God-in-Christ uses each of us, to meet the needs of a fractured, despairing and hurting world?

Back in August of 2006 and our week long mission work now over, the team from FCC all piled into rented cars to drive to the airport and our flight home. Not having anything left to wear that was clean, my husband, Barry, and I donned our red tee-shirts that had printed on its front, FCC Hurricane Katrina Mission Team. Once at the airport, we began the long wait in line to go through security.

Moments later, a local New Orleans woman walked up to us. As she approached us, her eyes remained trained on our tee-shirts. Though a complete stranger, after she read what was on them, she abruptly began to cry. Startled my husband gently asked, “Are you alright?” To which she replied, “After the agony of these past months, I don’t feel so alone anymore.”

Refrain: Indeed, Jesus replenishes our souls, to be God’s witnesses in dark times. To be God’s answer in a hurting

and wounded world. To be the repairer of the breach and the restorer of paths to dwell in. [5] Amen.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lower_Ninth_Ward

[3] 1 Kings 12:4

[4] Jeremiah 28:13

[5] <https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-9a/>

[6] Isaiah 58:12