

## *Yoked to Jesus*

Homily for the Fourteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time, Cycle A  
*Zechariah 9:9-10; Romans 8:9, 11-113; Matthew 11:25-30*

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Peace be with you! Jesus in his Gospel today uses a very strong agricultural image to speak about discipleship. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...for my yoke is easy and my burden light.” How might we understand this image of Jesus? How might it apply to our spiritual lives?

It was my first trip to the Philippines some ten years ago that I first saw small water buffaloes called “carabao” pulling yokes across muddy rice fields. A rice farmer would never put two young and inexperienced carabao together for this would result in furrows that would zig-zag across the field. No, the wise rice farmer knows that the young carabao needs to be yoked to an older and more experienced beast of burden in order to obtain straight furrows.



Jesus explains to his followers that what’s true in agricultural life is even more the case in our spiritual lives. In moments of sorrow and crisis, it might be important to remember that you and I are yoked to Jesus. Jesus is the spiritual beast of burden to whom we are yoked. Whatever suffering and whatever loss we experience in our lives, it is Jesus who has first trod the way. It is

Jesus who lifts the burden and shows us how to walk through the fields of labor and sorrow in our daily lives.

“You are to ‘take my yoke...and learn from me,’” writes St. Augustine, not because you are “...learning from me how to refashion the fabric of the world, nor to create all things visible and invisible, nor to work miracles and raise the dead. Rather you are simply learning of me ‘that I am meek and lowly of heart.’”

If the very heart of God is meek and lowly in the way St. Augustine describes, then we can gain some insight regarding the condition required for us to be God-like in our lives. This Gospel from St. Matthew today opens with Jesus extending welcome to children. It’s as though St. Matthew wants us to connect the simplicity of being yoked to Jesus with the simplicity of children who naturally come to Jesus.

Thus this Gospel from St. Matthew also provides the trip-wire for our own pastoral care as a Church. It is our attentiveness and care for the young and the vulnerable that most test the quality of the Church’s pastoral care for us all. If we fail to protect the children and vulnerable adults in our own communities of faith, we fail to live these words of Jesus for the fragile and vulnerable.

Who are the vulnerable today? Those who stand in the shadows of society: the unborn, the elderly, the dying, the hungry, the homeless, the imprisoned, the unemployed and the undereducated, the immigrant, the undocumented, the refugee. In light of our Gospel from St. Matthew we might well consider these vulnerable as the first inheritors of the Kingdom of God. No wonder, then, that Pope Francis has not only decried the “throw away” culture that allow for abortion, but the “throw away” culture that leaves migrants and refugees around the world exposed to poor working conditions and exposed to the COVID-19 infection.

Who are the vulnerable today? During this COVID-19 pandemic we need not look farther than here in Yakima County, home to this Cathedral from where I preach as bishop. Yakima County has one of the highest rates of infection per 100,000 in the country. As I prepare this homily, medical providers are maxed out in all of our hospitals. Patients are being transferred to other counties. While death rates from COVID-19 are elevated among those over the age of 65, no-one is exempt. Why does one person survive? Why does another person die? The answer remains largely unknown to scientists and researchers. Yet we want to uplift these words of Jesus so that even in the fatigue of patient care and scientific research, our medical responders know that they are not alone. We want to uplift in prayer those patients suffering from COVID-19 as well as their families often living in fear. Jesus is beside them all pulling the yoke. Our mission as the Church is to do the same through our prayer and through our charitable outreach to those in need.

Who are the vulnerable today? During this COVID-19 the business community finds itself vulnerable. Small business owners face unique and intense stress as they see their income and livelihood slip away. Essential workers in our grocery stores and mini-marts can find themselves feeling anxious and afraid of catching a virus they cannot see from a client or customer who may

be an asymptomatic carrier but may not know it. Workers in fruit and meat packing plants often cannot maintain social distancing due to the nature of their labor. Young people have written in social media about their fears for themselves and their parents working in fruit packing-plants. Jesus is close to our business leaders, to the most vulnerable pulling the yoke walking beside them in their burden of worry and fear. As a Church our mission is to follow this example of Jesus in our support and concern for the many owners of small businesses facing loss during this shutdown period.

In preaching this same text, the great St. Augustine advises, “If you wish to reach high, then begin at the lowest level. If you are trying to construct some mighty edifice in height, you will begin with the lowest foundation. This is humility.”

May we live humbly. May we imitate Jesus bearing the burdens of our neighbor. May we take into account their sorrow, their pain, their suffering, the place where they are cutting furrows in the hardest and rockiest parts of their lives. May we learn from Jesus and take upon ourselves his yoke. In doing so may we find our surest and most lasting rest. Peace be with you!

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