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The Yoke of Freedom  
Mimico Presbyterian Church and Wesley Mimico United Church  
July 6, 2014  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 7:13-25a and Matthew 11:16-30

Is anyone else a bit confused by our scripture readings today? On the one hand, we have Jesus saying “my yoke is easy. Come and find rest.” On the other hand, we have St. Paul, in Romans, who admits that he finds life - and the day to day choices that happen all the time - very hard to deal with. The words from Jesus are encouraging, engaging, comforting. St. Paul’s words are ... discouraging, disempowering ... downright scary. St. Paul’s words also probably resonate with us a bit too much for our own comfort.

The texts, taken together, invite us to consider whether or not life is easy, or life is difficult. Or perhaps more pointedly, is being a faithful Christian easy, or hard? And why is it so hard for Paul? But - given that Paul was a follower of Jesus - perhaps the best question to start with is, “What did Jesus know that Paul seems to have missed?”

We have to remember that Paul was a well-educated person. He was a Pharisee before he joined the Jesus movement. And the Pharisees were big on pushing the “rule” side of faith. Or, at least telling others to follow the rules. In Matthew 23, “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.’”

They tie up heavy burdens, and lay them on the shoulders of others. In other words, the Pharisees - and the law - is like a heavy burden. That sounds like the faith that Paul is talking about. At the time that Paul wrote Romans, his understanding of his own faith must have been evolving from the “rule-based” mentality he got from the Pharisees that felt like a heavy burden into something new that the Jesus movement was in the process of becoming.

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Now, when I just said, the the Jesus movement 2000 years ago was becoming less rule-based, did you think that I was suggesting that the Jesus movement - and by extension our own churches - have moved beyond rule-based thinking? Do you think we ourselves have fully embraced the type of freedom that Jesus was talking about? Or is it possible that we struggle just like Paul does with the tension between feeling the freedom of the spirit and our own internally-felt need to create and follow rules?

Ever since my boys became teenagers, I have loved Costco. Particularly the meat section. But Costco delivers more than products. In the current issue of their magazine “Costco Connection”, they have an article about different approaches to teaching mathematics. I’m not just sure why Costco is interesting in teaching math, but in the article, they compare the two essential approaches to teaching mathematics that have been popular in North America. The “traditional” method which relies on learning rules and memorizing facts. And so-called “discovery math” which emphasizes openness, exploration, visualization, and deep learning. Discovery math allows people to wonder about math, not just solve specific preset problems.

The basic question is this - Is mathematics about following rules, or is mathematics about being on a journey of discovery.

That’s the same question posed to us by our readings - but about our faith. Is faith about following rules, or is faith about being on a spiritual journey of discovery?

I was delighted this week to learn about a project called “1001 New Worshiping Communities”. If you haven’t heard of this project - yet - it’s an initiative started by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).<sup>1</sup> To the credit of the Presbyterian Church, they are trying to start 1001 new worshipping communities. Not 1001 new churches, but 1001 new worshipping communities. Now what do they mean by a “new worshipping community”?

“New” is about both making new disciples of Jesus and creating new forms of “church”. “Worshipping” is about both being gathered together by the spirit and being

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.onethousandone.org>

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sent out by the spirit. And “Community” is about mutual care, acceptability, and sustainability.

In other words, the “1001 New Worshiping Communities” project is not about the status quo. It is not about following existing rules. It is not about what we are hung up on in the United Church these days which is “revitalization”. It is about new life and new relationships. It’s about listening to Paul a little less, and listening to Jesus a little more. It is about being on a spiritual journey of discover.

For example, one new worshiping community near Los Angeles started with the focus on reconciling relationships in an area full of dechurched people. One group occurs - in their words - at the intersection between spirituality and sexuality. The other groups I read about are all based on listening to the deep needs of the community and finding ways to bring the love of Jesus into play. All of the stories I read are not about following the rules. They are about following the spirit on a journey of new life.

And considering some of those examples of New Worshiping Communities, I come to realize why Costco has a magazine article that discusses methods for teaching mathematics. It’s not because they care about teaching, or about mathematics. It’s because they care about parents. And they know that many parents are uncomfortable with mathematics in school. Makes sense. Instead of following the rules, which say that a Costco magazine must be about products, they have broken the rules and decided to create a magazine about people - about their customers.

And if Costco can care about its customers, surely we, as a church, can care about the people we deal with too.

So where does that leave us? Do we feel called to engage right here in Mimico in new ways? Do we actually want to engage with the deep needs of our community? Or do we just want to hold onto the burden of our current ministries? What is the model to do new things here anyway?

That model for growth and change is Jesus, his life, and his ministry. The model

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is being yoked with Jesus. Jesus said, “take my yoke upon you, and learn from me”. I think we are supposed to imagine a yoke - one of those heavy wooden yokes, with room for two animals. I have heard that when two animals are yoked together, a mature, larger animal can train a younger, smaller animal beside it because the stronger animal forces the weaker animal to follow along and to learn as it goes. In our case, if we imagine being yoked with Jesus ... imagine what we might learn.

And - to push the analogy further - if we were yoked with Jesus, do you think that Jesus would be helping us walk the old paths we have always walked, or would Jesus help us find new paths to do new walking? To build new relationships? To create and explore new ministry opportunities? What furrows have we been plowing? What furrows would Jesus want us to plow?

Or in more practical terms, what burdens have we already been shouldering as churches? And how committed are we to those burdens? How committed are we to our own burdens? How committed are we to our own dreams? Are we willing to leave those burdens to take care of themselves so that we can move on to new burdens? New work? New ministries? New ways of being church?

Being yoked together sounds - in some ways - painful. But we can think of being yoked with Jesus as a partnership. A good partnership. A healthy partnership. A partnership that could lead us to engage on a spiritual journey to new life. New truths. New freedom. Perhaps the right yoke, with the right partner, would not feel like a burden. Perhaps the right yoke, with the right partner, could actually be a yoke of freedom.

Jesus has given us freedom - but we have to work for it. Thanks be to God!  
*Amen.*