

Sermon by Rev. Lusmarina Campos Garcia  
On Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30  
July 3 2011

Between burdens and yokes, there is a kite, a flower and a confirmand.

Rubem Alves tells a story about a kite that was made by a boy who loved playing with kites. He liked this one he had made so much that he put a smile right in the middle of it. And he spent days making it fly. But one day, while flying, the kite saw a flower and fell in love with it. The kite found a way to free itself from the hands of the boy and gave its line to the flower to handle. How happy both were together! The kite would fly higher and higher, and then come back to tell the flower all it had seen. But one day, the flower started being envious and jealous. To envy is to feel unhappy with the things others have that we don't. To be jealous is to suffer when the other is happy and we are not. Because of these two feelings, the flower started thinking: if the kite really loves me, it would not be so happy when it is far away from me. And when the kite came back, the flower was sorrowful and bitter, always asking questions about where the kite had been and who it had seen. Then the flower started shortening the line, not allowing the kite to fly high any longer. The line was shortened and shortened to the point that the kite could only fly just above the flower.

According to the author, this is not the end of the story. There are three possible endings:

1. The kite, tired of the flower's behavior, decided to cut the line and look for a less controlling hand.
2. The kite, even though it was saddened by the flower's attitude, decided to stay, but never smiled again.
3. The flower realized that her behavior had no basis; it was meaningless. Then a completely unexpected thing happened, the flower wished so much to fly together with the kite that one day, the flower became a butterfly and they both flew together.

I was reminded of this story when thinking of burdens and yokes and our capacity to produce and reproduce them. There are burdens that are brought to us by external forces and yokes that are imposed by unpredictable powers. Politics and economy, for instance, are two powers that determine our way of living but we normally do not have much (or at least no direct) influence on them. An illness does not usually enter our bodies by our own decision. But there are burdens and yokes that come from within us that keep us from being "gentle and humble in heart," to use Jesus' words. We sometimes make a storm out of a drop of water, a war out of a word, a quagmire out of a thought, a mountain out of a mole hill. And sometimes our actions even don't correspond to our wishes. We do what we don't want to do and don't do what we want to, says the apostle Paul. How can we deal with this complexity within us, with our capacity to duplicate burdens and yokes, with our jealousy and perhaps envy, with our insecurities and fears that keep us from recognizing truth beyond ourselves?

"Learn from me," says Jesus, "for I am gentle and humble in heart." To learn from Jesus is to learn "from the actions and words of Jesus the liberator, revealer and teacher, a life of alternative practices, structures, priorities, relationships and perspectives," says Warren Carter. "It is to further his liberating work through proclamation and action," Carter continues. To learn from Jesus is to be open to take on Jesus' yoke.

The yoke is a familiar symbol of burden bearing, oppression, and subjugation. Yokes were laid on the necks and shoulders of oxen and also on prisoners of war and slaves. But "yoke" was also used metaphorically with positive connotations, as in the invitation to wisdom (see Sirach 51:26) and as a rabbinic metaphor for the difficult but joyous task of obedience to Torah.

Jesus says that his "yoke is easy", and his "burden is light." What is this yoke that Jesus offers? We might surmise that it is his teachings, his way of discipleship, which is not arduous but life-giving. And what does it mean to take Jesus yoke? To take Jesus yoke "is to be yoked to the one in whom God's kingdom of justice, mercy and compassion is breaking into this world" (Elizabeth Johnson); it is to find the rest our souls long for.

To take Jesus yoke is to learn "to take it easy". Taking it easy doesn't mean that everything in life is to be taken lightly, but it does mean that not everything in life should feel heavy. Being serious is not the same as scowling, and having a deep commitment does not exclude playfulness.

To take on Jesus' yoke is to learn that we may not find all the answers we search for; it is to know that it is all right to stop struggling after we have tried hard; it is to feel free to desist from those thoughts or actions that generate anger, bitterness and fear in us. It is to learn again how to live joyfully. It is also to be able to allow the other to experience God's presence through our lives as individuals and as community. How do we help our children and adolescents to experience God through our lives? How do we help Clarissa to do so?

Clarissa is that beautiful adolescent who is a gymnast, as well as playing violin, piano and doing her normal studies at school. Clarissa is going to be confirmed this morning. She started confirmation last year with five other people her age and will be confirmed before the others because she is moving to Basel this week. She will speak to us in a moment about her experience in church.

When Clarissa looks at us, what does she see? Can she see God through us? Or perhaps she sees a group of discontented children "sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played flute for you and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn'"?

Interesting how often the image of infants is brought up in this morning's Gospel reading. They are either a metaphor for "this generation" who criticize Jesus and John, unsatisfied and unable to see truth beyond themselves, or the only ones able to receive the wisdom of God.

And our generation? And our congregation? And ourselves? To what will Jesus compare us? To the unsatisfied, complaining children or the ones able to receive the wisdom of God? To a kite or to a flower? A possessive flower that needs to control by cutting the very possibility of the kite being who it is â destroying its capacity to fly? A submissive kite that decides to preserve its love but will never smile again? A liberated kite that doesn't accept losing its identity? Or perhaps a liberated flower, one who realizes the burdens and yokes she created and is able to evolve into a butterfly and fly together with her beloved kite?

Are we able to recognize in Jesus his true identity - the Son of God, the one who liberates us to live as a free and responsible people? The one who offers us a way through our capacity to produce and reproduce burdens and yokes? Are we open to learn from Jesus "a gentle and humble heart"? Will we hold Clarissa and her family in our prayers, as well as the Davises, and the Gibson-Evens to whom we are also saying farewell this morning, so they may choose to take Jesus' "yoke" that is "easy" and his "burden" that is "light"?

Between burdens and yokes, there are some adults, children, adolescents, and a kite and a flower. Amen.