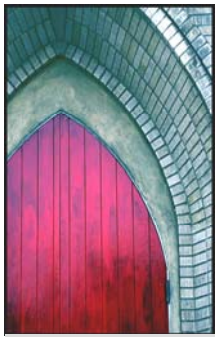


BEAR THE YOKE THAT FITS

Oak Hill's Birthday Message, 2008

TEXT: MATTHEW 11:28-30 (ESV)



Rev. Russ Ramsey
January 6, 2008

Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

Oak Hills Turns Nine:

Each year we set apart this first Sunday to celebrate Oak Hill's birthday. This year, we celebrate nine years as an organized church. It's also a personal milestone in that this week marks the fifth anniversary of my calling as a pastor here. The years pass quickly, don't they? These are words many of us have said many times, no doubt. But the reason we talk about the passage of time is because we notice as time passes that things don't remain as they were. So we commemorate, observe and take time to bid adieu to another year, and, in effect, welcome change.

It is in this spirit that I try to craft my birthday sermons each year. I want to reflect back on where we've been and look ahead to where the Lord might be taking us. So I've been asking questions like, "What kind of year was 2007?" and "What, as a pastor, should I call attention to as we kick off this new year?" In the previous years, I've noticed every birthday message has centered on how God continues to use this church for glorious things. As I'd try to summarize, I'd come back to words like growth, blessing, health, preparation, purpose, grace and mercy.

Reflecting on 2007, I've felt the weight of what has been for many a very hard year and a new word has crept onto my list—**burdened**. Last year some experienced illness and injury, some sudden, some gradual, some lingering. Some miscarried. Others remained unable to conceive. There were relationships where we didn't leave things as we should've. Broken marriages. Parents wept over the souls of their children, and children over their parents. We lied. We were lied to. Both hurt very much.

We saw a financial recession in the home, the church and the marketplace—and some here are really struggling financially. As a church body, we've shared some burdens together. We did a lot of heavy lifting from the pulpit this past year—dealing with some topics and doctrines that have great emotional, personal, intellectual and spiritual weight behind them.

And on Friday, May 11, at around 3:00PM, Will Reno died after battling brain cancer for a little over a year. We love Will.

How do we head into a new year when we're still reeling from the last one? We turn to Jesus to hear His words to the burdened in Matthew 11. They're familiar words and comforting, especially to the burdened. And I believe Jesus means to comfort us today with these words.

But as it is with the words of Christ, as comforting as they are, they're every bit as challenging. Will you receive comfort **and** correction today? Jesus' word is never just about how to process what's behind us. His word is about running the race set before us as His witnesses in this world. And since it is, we can't escape the fact that His words of comfort are at the same time also words of strong challenge to us all. May He give us ears to hear both His comfort and correction today.

Matthew 11:28-30

²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Will Reno's Truck:

Earlier this fall, the transmission in our minivan went out. We are a family of six and our other car only safely holds five, so as long as we didn't all go anywhere together, we'd be fine. But our community group was meeting one night and we were starving for fellowship, so I came up with an idea. Lisa would take the kids in the car and I'd ride my new bike. So an hour before they left, I started pedaling. It was a cold, uphill ride of about eight miles. I made it, but it was a burden I wanted lifted.

Travis Keller drove me home, but it was Ruth Reno who really lifted my burden. She heard about my bike ride and told me to come over and borrow Will's truck. Not wanting to overstep, I hesitated—Will loved his truck. But she insisted, "Its just a truck, and if Will were here he'd want you to use it." That was true, so I relented and drove it until the van was ready two weeks later.

Will's truck is a **MAN'S** truck—a stick with big fat tires. Ruth fell out of it once, she says, because she underestimated how high off the ground it rode. In the console between the seats is Will's wallet, a few CD's and some directions he'd jotted down on a post-it note once. Stuck in the driver's visor are a few wild turkey feathers Will either found or plucked off the bird itself.

While Ruth's kind gesture lifted a burden from me, it did not leave me burden-free. Instead, Ruth's offer was really to **exchange** one burden for another. And I thank her for it. Let me explain. Will and I were born one day apart. He was an acute reminder to me of how fragile and sacred life is. I couldn't help but compare my life to his, and I admired him very much.

Driving his truck, I felt close to Will—not mystically, like he was present—but in the sense that I was occupying a space he had personally appointed. I thought about him all the time—about how he was with Jesus now, and how I could have just as easily been the one with cancer. I thought about my mortality and about the undeniable work of the Spirit of God in Will's life. Will gave far more than he ever took. I thought about the man he was and the man I am, and the difference between the two.

So although Ruth lifted one burden, she did not take my burden away. In some ways, it would have been easier to pedal away and think about the cold for two weeks than drive Will's truck. But it would not have been better. Ruth, by the grace of God, gave me a different burden to bear—a better one that suited me and was for my good. When Jesus calls the burdened to Himself, **NEVER** does He promise to render us burden-free. I can't tell you how to live a burden-free life because we weren't meant to be idle in this world. I can tell you Jesus will exchange the burdens that bend you to the ground for ones that will suit you well. Let's unpack our text one clause at a time to see this.

Take His Yoke and Learn from Him:

COME TO ME: Jesus is not hiding, but rather is calling, “Come out, come out, wherever you are. Come to me.” It’s not, “Catch me if you can.” We’d never find Him unless He offered Himself freely. And this is just what He does. But He’s specific. We’re not to go anywhere **but** to Him for rest for our souls, and we’re not to wait for help to come from any other place.

ALL WHO LABOR AND ARE HEAVY LADEN: There is great grace in these words. He’s addressing a condition we shouldn’t be in, so we know He’s speaking to people living contrary to His will. Jesus is speaking to the self-reliant, not condemningly but with an invitation. And there’s no precondition to go first and tie up loose ends or make ourselves presentable. We are to come to Him as we are. Heavy laden means we’re carrying great burdens. For some, it’s the burden of sin—guilt of failing yet again. For some its sorrow—we’re just so sad for deeply personal reasons, or filled with remorse for something we’ve done, or grieving fractured relationships. For some, you’re overwhelmed with anxiety. The panic attacks are debilitating. You wonder if life is worth living. There’s hope for us all in these words. Our failures and struggles **qualify** us for grace. We’ll **never** have it all together. For that, He says, “Come.”

TAKE MY YOKE UPON YOU... MY YOKE IS EASY: We need to see this. Jesus doesn’t invite us to be “yoke-free.” He offers a better fitting yoke. A yoke is a training tool, meant to guide us in the work we’re called to. A good fitting yoke maximizes the effectiveness of the one wearing it. Jesus, raised a carpenter, probably made many of these. See, Jesus isn’t just welcoming sinners back to an idle life. He means to use us for His harvest. It’s work we can’t do on our own, but the yoke distributes the weight, making the load easier to bear. In the Christian life, there is work to be done, trials to endure and battles to fight. But the comforts of the Gospel far outweigh the cross we bear. His Yoke is easy because it promotes a harmonious relationship between us and the One driving us in the work we’re bound to.

AND LEARN FROM ME, FOR I AM GENTLE AND LOWLY IN HEART: We’re not just called to bear His yoke, but to imitate Him in the way we go about our work. He is our great example, “who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (Phil 2:6-8) Jesus was selfless in His sacrifice, so we can trust when we come to Him that He’ll deal gently with us. It doesn’t matter how educated, successful, healthy, disciplined or hardened we are. He came for sinners.

I WILL GIVE YOU REST... REST FOR YOUR SOULS: The rest Jesus offers is **not** release from spiritual responsibility or obligation. His call is of greater importance than any other. (Matt 5:20) But His demands are such that to respond to them brings relief—not rest from burden bearing itself, but rest for our restless souls—and the assurance that we are living as we were meant to.

Correction and Comfort:

This is the Gospel. There is a life we were meant to know and can know by His grace. But we must deal honestly with His word. In it we find both correction and comfort. You cannot obtain one without embracing the other. So let’s look at both.

CORRECTION: Will Oak Hills be a healthy church a year from now? When I look at myself, I’m gripped by the fact that but by the grace of God I could **easily** finish this year a miserable, ineffective pastor. Here’s how I’d do it. I’d begin with an ideal for how I think things should be—where everything’s fine. Then I’d avoid confrontation, equate a balanced budget with effective ministry and keep to myself mostly, justifying my relational withdrawal as a means of maintaining peace. And by the end of the year, I will have failed to love anyone here personally. I will have sustained a year-long apathy toward the poor and broken. I will have spent more time avoiding being known than I spent in prayer. And all because I wanted to be burden-free.

And your fate is similar. Your ideal could keep you so busy that you’ll feel you’re always pushing a boulder up a mountain. You’ll protest that life shouldn’t be this hard, so you’ll try to make it easier by saying no to new relationships because you have too many as it is. You’ll say no to serving others because you can’t afford the time, money or organizational headspace it requires. But you’ll justify this—you’ve got a lot going on and most of it, as anyone can see, is obviously religious. And by the year’s end, you’ll have failed to love people here personally. And you will have sustained a year-long apathy toward the poor and broken. You’ll have spent more time avoiding relationships than you spent in prayer—all because you wanted to be burden-free.

And together, rather than longing to know and make known the astonishing grace of God, we’ll just long to be left alone. **And we, beloved, will be a terribly unhealthy church!** But has it occurred to us that Jesus **means** for our lives to be filled to overflowing? **He means for you to bear burdens.** You just can’t embrace this because the yoke you currently wear is a debilitating fit of your own making. You need one of a Master Carpenter’s design. So what does it mean to wear His yoke? It means to focus on the work He has called His people to.

What is that work? Jesus summarized it for us—“love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt 22:36-40) Or put another way, “What is good and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6:8) Or another, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God is this: visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and keep yourself unstained from the world.” (James 1:27) Indulge me for one more; “A new commandment I give to you, love one another just as I have loved you...” (John 13:34)

COMFORT: This year don’t take back more of your life. Give more away for the sake of being His witness in this world. This is the kind of work that brings rest to your souls—which is what so many are crying out for. If you’re asking for a fish, will He give you a snake? (Lk 11:11) You’re asking for relief, and He’s telling you to obey His call to love God and your neighbor with all that you have and are. The best way to live is to yield to Him. But do you have the strength? Whether you know it or not, you are utterly dependent upon Jesus for everything. Trust **Him** for the strength you need. He promises, “My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:9)

Take comfort in knowing Christ offers a yoke that fits. Find in His words of correction comfort. May we never find relief **except** under His yoke. May we strain under any other, and may we see this as a mercy from Christ when we do. May His grace so sustain and satisfy us that we want most in life is to be yoked to Him for, “we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (Eph 2:10) May we labor yoked to Him, and may He use Oak Hills to make known His astonishing grace in 2008.