

## A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts

Preached by Sister Adele Marie Ryan, SSM on July 9, 2017 (Proper 9A)

Invitations, whether to a baby shower or a barbecue, often contain four letters printed in a corner beneath the main body of the invitation: RSVP. Most people know that the letters stand for the French words, *Répondez s'il vous plaît*, meaning, “please respond” or, more literally, “respond if you please.” However, not everyone is aware of the meaning of these four letters. A young engaged couple leafing through an album of sample wedding invitations notices the letters and they wonder at their meaning. That is, until the future groom in what seems to him a stunning insight, exclaims: RSVP = *Remember, send valuable presents!*

Towards the end of today’s Gospel reading we heard the greatest invitation ever given: ‘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.’ These words of Jesus are among the all-time scripture favorites; they’ve been on the “top 40 Bible hit parade” for years, and no less a composer than Handel set the words to music.

“Come” – that word is used nearly three thousand times in the Bible and nearly always refers to an invitation. In fact, the Bible has been called a book of invitations from God. “Come” says Jesus, and he meant the invitation for everyone, but not all his contemporaries responded favorably. Far from it; the local opposition party, the scribes and Pharisees, who had previously rejected the message of John the Baptist, now paid Jesus the same favor. And so, with no small degree of exasperation, Jesus says: “How can I describe this generation?” Whatever games we play, you don’t like it. John came fasting and you called him crazy; I came feasting and you call me a lush, a friend of the riff-raff.

But there were those who did respond to Jesus’ invitation; they followed and became disciples. For them Jesus gives thanks to God; the sophisticates and know-it-alls ignored the invitation but the ordinary people recognized an invitation that could not be refused. They were the really smart ones; in Jesus they found freedom, hope and strength. Life under imperial Roman rule imposed heavy and painful burdens, and the Jewish religious leadership imposed even more, weighing people down with copious and meticulous laws, rules and regulations.

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Heavy burdens are not in short supply in our world today. Besides the personal tragedies that may be ours, we are citizens of a troubled and divided nation; we live in a world that is for many, a fearful and hostile place; and our threatened planet appears more fragile than ever. The church is not having an easy time of it either, diminished in numbers, beset by dissension, yet struggling on in hope, trusting in the mercy, grace and promise of Jesus.

And so, my friends, it is also to us that Jesus says, “Come to me and you will find rest.”

But, how shall we find that rest? The answer Jesus gives is paradoxical and puzzling: “Take my yoke upon you...” Is not a yoke confining, binding and controlling? A yoke is a metaphor for whatever controls us as we make our way through life.

An Asian-American woman writes about how she “grew up believing that her role in life was to accommodate everyone else, to please everyone else, and to live up to the myth of being the model minority. She reports her success in “towing the party line, following the rules and echoing back” what authority figures wanted to hear.” Life in her church brought “added regulations, restricting even further what [she] could or could not do, demanding perfection and adding more pressure.”

Such a story reveals that we may not be as independent and free as we like to think, and most of us willingly put on a yoke of some kind or other.

In biblical times yokes were vital pieces of equipment. A yoke is a wooden crosspiece that is fastened over the necks of two animals and attached to the plow or cart that they are to pull. A farmer in need of a plow couldn’t just go to the mall and get one off the rack at the local Yokes-R-Us store. Yokes had to be specially designed and properly fitted so as not to harm the valuable farm animals; they were custom-made to suit the task and get the job done. Yoked together, two oxen shared and performed heavy tasks, because of the balance and strength that came from being yoked together. The yoke distributed the load between them.

Jesus invites us come to him. He offers the excitement of discovering through discipleship that the burdens we carry can be lightened by being yoked to him. The paradox of yoke and rest is de-mystified through our relationship with Jesus. The yoke he offers is a shared yoke; it is “easy” because it is well-fitting, and he bears it with us. It will help lift our burdens, relieve our weariness, and bring us rest. From Jesus we may learn the unforced rhythms of grace. You don’t have to pull that cart all alone.

It is a truly amazing and wondrous thing that God longs for a personal relationship with each one of us and that nothing would bring more joy to the heart of Jesus than the honor of your company. Or, as a wise woman of the 13<sup>th</sup> century wrote:

God has enough  
of all good things  
except one:  
Of communion with humans,  
God can never have enough.<sup>i</sup>

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RSVP = the favor of a reply is requested by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and he won’t take “no” for an answer. Why? Because the party won’t be complete without you.