

**September 3, 2017**

**TEXT: Matthew 16:21–26**

**TITLE: Crosses & Yokes: Does Christianity Work?**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

During the month of August, Patrice, Heather and I all preached from the book of Judges. We re-told the stories of the brave women Deborah and Jael, the leader Gideon, and the strongman Samson. The stories focused on trusting God even when the odds are against you and the enemy's power is overwhelming, or honoring God by keeping one's vows and acting with integrity one's whole life long. The stories were good to hear again, but it must be admitted, they were filled with violence. Jael killed the Canaanite general by driving a tent stake through his head. Gideon's nighttime raid led to the death of 120,000 Midianites. And why was Samson constantly at war with the Philistines?

The Christian scriptures include difficult stories—violent stories—tales of one people favored over another, of slaves and concubines abused, and angry prayers seeking vengeance against enemies. There are plenty of critics of Christianity who see little good in the bible. They point to how our faith history contains holy wars and crusades, inquisitions and torture. Jesus lived 2000 years ago and yet nations whose citizens worship the Prince of Peace have fought world wars, amassed stockpiles of nuclear and chemical weapons, and wreaked havoc on our global ecology. So it is fair to ask: Does Christianity actually work? What reasons do we give for saying "Yes" to Christianity, "Yes" to Jesus Christ, in today's modern, enlightened, hurting, searching world?

Since it is the beginning of the school year, it is appropriate to note that this topic would more than fill up a semester long college course. So forgive me if I can only touch on a few highlights in humbly offering an answer to the question: *Does Christianity work?* There are at least three major contributions Christianity has made to global civilization that changed the world for the good. First, our Jewish ancestors and colleagues gave to the world the gift of monotheism – the idea that religious faith is oriented, not to multitudes of gods, spirits and powers, but to one God. At a time when civilizations battled over land in the name of countless regional deities, the Judaism of Abraham, Jacob, Moses taught the radical idea that there is only one God to be worshiped and served. This is not to say that there is nothing to be learned from other religions, or there was nothing of value in other's beliefs. But monotheism, faith in one Creator God, required people to look beyond their own boundaries and recognize that the Lord of their lives was Lord over other people as well. And if we are to worship this one God, perhaps we should find ways to live peaceably with all God's children.

Second, the message of both the Old and New Testament opens our eyes to the idea of a common human nature equally precious in the eyes of God. One shared nature unites us all. Whether male or female, young or old, American or N. Korean; whether sinful human society has named us slave or free; whether

fragile human physiology has deemed us disabled or healthy—all humans are equally precious, equally loved, equally children of God. That was an explosive revelation on the stage of world civilization. It became the basis for ending human sacrifices and infanticide (killing of unwanted young children), for empowering women, abolishing slavery, and working towards universal standards of justice and human rights. Do we fully live into this truth? No. But our sinful rejection of God’s justice does not negate the fact that through Christ, the revolutionary language of “neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free” forever changes how we see one another.

Third, if there is only one God over all the earth, and if all people are united as children of this Creator God, Christianity also taught us that all human power is limited, but love is eternal. This was especially important from the time of the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago. Out of that period came the seeds for representative government and democracy, for reminding those who wear crowns and play the “game of thrones” that their power and authority is not unlimited. Kings and subjects, presidents and citizens stand alike under God’s justice and Christ’s law. Earthly powers will pass away, but God’s power, expressed through compassion, service, wisdom, mercy, and love – that power abides forever.

In one of his lectures, the Christian writer C.S. Lewis said these memorable words: *I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not [just] because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.* Christianity works because by it we understand the world and see so much that gives us hope as we walk by faith.

Now, even if you name these contributions of Christianity to your skeptical friends, they will likely not be convinced. They will still have arguments and rebuttals, as is their right. They may insist that the things you’ve mentioned are too abstract and impersonal. What about the problems in the church today – the racism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia that marks life in Christian America today? My advice is that if they truly want to have a conversation about all this, you will need to shift from the general to the specific—from world perspectives to wood perspectives. More precisely, the wood of yokes and of crosses.

In Matthew 11, Jesus offered words of comfort: *Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and learn from me.* Now, if you’re weary and carrying something heavy, taking on a yoke may not seem like a comforting alternative. But Jesus insists that his yoke is easy, his burden is light, and in Him we will find rest.

The reality is that in this life, we all carry something. We carry burdens tied to who we are (gender, sexual identity, age) and who we are with (family responsibilities, job workloads, financial obligations). The world’s yoke can be

quite heavy and hard—because the world believes in lesser gods in competition with one another (my God is better than your God). The world believes, like the slogan painted on the barn in Orwell’s Animal Farm, that “all creatures are equal, but some are more equal than others.” The world believes that thrones and crowns and racial privilege have an authority that heaven cannot challenge or contravene.

Putting on the yoke of Christ means we first set down those false worldviews. It can be scary, because the world’s answers are so dominant—build walls to stop immigrants, use cheap fuel despite global warming, allow for unequal public education so long as I can live somewhere with good schools, spend billions for military while cutting funds for kids, the disabled, elderly, Planned Parenthood and those battling addiction. But by faith we set down those false yokes and pick up Christ’s yoke—knowing that there is one God who is Lord of all; that we are one family under God; that this world will pass away, but God’s love is eternal. Serving others as we carry the wood of Christ’s yoke, we find rest.

Later, in Matthew 16, Jesus offered challenging words: *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross.* Often people are tempted to hear in these words a call to self-abuse—to deny ourselves, keep silent, let others put a cross of shame on you just as Jesus silently endured the shame of crucifixion. But that’s not what Jesus is saying here. We believe in the incarnation of God in Jesus—the fullness of God’s will, God’s intent for human life manifest in Jesus. Incarnation didn’t happen at one point in history—on Christmas Eve when Mary gave birth in Bethlehem. Incarnation was a lifelong process. Jesus’ entire life showed us God. Jesus’ life—his words, his healings, his sadness, miracles and perseverance—revealed the incarnation of the fullness of God. In the same Matthew 16 passage, Jesus said, “What good is it to gain the whole world but forfeit your “psyche”, your life, your soul, your very being?” We put down worldly yokes of false power and pick up Christ’s yoke of service. In the same way, we stop chasing after false gods and false goals and pick up a cross of compassionate sacrifice—of loving our neighbors as ourselves. I won’t lie—crosses are hard to carry. But since when does something of value come at no cost?

Bryan Stevenson in his book Just Mercy (which I highly recommend) once gave a talk at a church in which he referenced the woman accused of adultery who was brought before Jesus. People were ready to stone her until Jesus said “Whoever is without sin cast the first stone” and they left her alone. Today, self-righteousness, fear and anger cause Christians and non-Christians alike to hurl stones at those who have fallen down in our midst, even when we know we should forgive or show compassion. Stevenson said we can no longer simply watch this happen. We have to step forward and be stonecatchers.<sup>1</sup> Yes, it hurts to catch the stones people throw. But what will it profit us if we gain the whole world but forfeit our soul?

---

<sup>1</sup> Bryan Stevenson, Just Mercy, p. 109.

I believe Christianity works. Like the sun, it is the light that allows me to see and understand the world around me—good and bad alike. Throughout history, it points us to one God, one humanity, and one loving power that alone is worthy of being incarnated by us. And when things get personal—when I wonder where Christ is right here and now—I hear Jesus’ call: Look to the wood around you. Take up your yoke and serve. Take up your cross and care for these my beloved. Don’t be a stumbling block but be a stonecatcher. To God be the glory.

AMEN.