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Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Thomas Gumbleton | Jul. 10, 2008 The Peace Pulpit

All of us, in one way or another, carry burdens, carry heavy yokes, so it's always helpful and encouraging to hear Jesus say to us, "Come to me. Take my burden upon you, my yoke, for my yoke is good and my burden is light."

But the people to whom first Jesus spoke those words had even more reason, I think, to welcome what Jesus says to them, because for them, there was a burden that was placed upon them that Jesus rejected. It was the burden of the human laws that had been created and posed upon them by the religious leaders. In another part of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says this: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees occupy the seat of Moses, so listen and do all they say, but do not imitate what they do, for they themselves do not practice what they teach. They prepare heavy burdens that are very difficult to carry, and lay them on the shoulders of the people."

In the Jewish tradition at the time of Jesus, there was this law that had been developed after God had entered into a covenant with God's people and said, "I will be your God, you will be my people." He made this covenant with them and asked them to follow God's covenant, but then these religious laws began to accumulate. There were 613 of them and they were a heavy burden.

It was so extreme that on the Sabbath day, a person could not walk more than about a quarter mile, 400 yards or so. There were many dietary and purification laws. For Jesus himself, if he touched a leper, he would be unclean and could not enter the temple. There were these laws that people had to be constantly aware of and as Jesus said, those who impose the law-the Pharisees and scribes-they put this heavy burden on the people, but they themselves, for the most part, ignored it, and Jesus couldn't stand that kind of hypocrisy.

When he was saying to the people, "Come to me. Take my yoke upon you. My burden is good, it is light," he was dismissing all of those human laws and said, as you might guess.

There's really one law. It's the law of love. 'That's my law, the law of love.'

What that means is made clear to us in the first lesson today, where, as I mentioned before, the prophet Zechariah was speaking to a people who had been through war and violence, their land destroyed, their houses destroyed. They're back but they're leaderless so there's still a lot of chaos and suffering.

Zechariah says, "Rejoice, daughter of Zion. Shout for joy? for a leader is coming, just and victorious, humble,

riding on a donkey. No more chariots in Ephraim, no more horses in Jerusalem. The warrior's bow shall be broken when this new leader dictates peace to the nations. This leader will reign from sea to sea, from the River to the ends of the earth."

That passage obviously was very important to Jesus because it declares so clearly his way, the way of love.

You'll be rid of chariots, weapons of war. The warrior's bow will be broken. God will bring peace in this new leader, and of course, the new leader is Jesus.

You can tell that this was a very important passage to him, that it spoke to him and to his way because on that last Sunday of his life, the Sunday we celebrate each year as Palm Sunday. When Jesus came into Jerusalem being hailed by the people as "king of the Jews," they were thinking of him as the new warrior leader, a leader who would help them overthrow the Roman occupiers.

[They thought] he would be a great warrior leader like David, but Jesus rejected all of that because very carefully, he organizes his entry into Jerusalem. Remember what it was? He came riding on a donkey, the son of an ass; he was living out this prophecy of Zechariah. He was saying that "for me, war, warriors are over. My way is the way of love, of non-violence, a way that will bring peace."

That is the yoke that Jesus offers to us, this burden that he asks us to carry.

Obviously we have a long way to go in trying to live up to what Jesus shows us, what he invites us to take upon ourselves-this yoke of love, this light burden of reaching out in forgiveness. He spelled it all out, as you know, and you've heard so many times, in that Sermon on the Mount, where he urges us, "Forgiveness, that's my way. Even if you're coming to the altar with your gift and you remember a brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift, go first and be reconciled."

See, forgiveness, always reaching out, be the first to forgive. Then Jesus goes on in that Sermon on the Mount and tells us that we should use creative ways to overcome violence. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other. If someone wants you to go one mile, go two. If someone wants to take your coat, give them your cloak also. Just reach out in love, surpassing anything. Be creative in responding to whatever violence by love, and even love your enemy. Do good to those who hurt you. Return good for evil.

That's the yoke of Jesus, not human laws that weigh us down, but this law of love that can open up a way of peace, a way of joy, bring the reign of God into our midst.

We live in a country, of course, where there is so much violence, tens of thousands of people killed every year with handguns. In our homes, there's domestic violence; the violence of abortion; the violence of the death penalty.

Of course, this weekend, when we celebrate our birthday as a nation, what do we celebrate most of all? Military violence, our wars. It's not the way of Jesus, all of this violence.

"My burden, my yoke, is the law of love."

I hope that we will listen carefully to Jesus today and hear his words, "Come to me, you who labor and are burdened, and I will refresh you." Live according to my way, the way of love, and it will bring peace.

We might think it's very difficult to do this (and it will be difficult), but then we should remind ourselves of what St. Paul tells us today: "Christ is within you," as Christ will come in a very special way to Sydney today, in her baptism. Christ is in all of us because we're baptized and though our body is branded by death as a consequence of sin, our spirit is life and holiness.

If the spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, is within you then God, who raised Jesus among the dead, will also give life to you. God will do it through God's spirit which dwells within you. We must open ourselves to that spirit so that they we can accept the invitation Jesus gives us today: Take my yoke upon you, my burden, the law of love. Live it, and we will be refreshed, we will find peace in our hearts, and we will build peace in our homes, in our country, and in the world.

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