

BEYOND BELIEF

My grandfather was a wonderful and kind man whose life revolved around a few simple things: his garden, his family, and his church. When I was young, his deep and consistent life of prayer and devotion was a model for me. But as I grew older, was better able to understand the substance of his prayers, and could speak to him about God, it began to dawn on me that his faith was in many ways a handicap. I thought of God as a loving companion and as infinitely forgiving. But Grandpa thought of God as a stern judge, as a scorekeeper. He didn't see God as one who was always opening our lives to new and wondrous possibilities but as one who insisted we close ourselves down and become passively obedient. In his last years, my grandfather was increasingly fretful about what would happen to him after death and he was unable to have the unswerving confidence we assume a person of deep faith should have. He was, in short, spiritually anxious and his faith, rather than allaying this anxiety, exacerbated it. I'd even go so far to say that his faith was a burden.

Alas, my grandfather's ideas about God aren't that uncommon. While all of us have something dysfunctional about our image of God and an unhealthy side to our spiritual lives, there are lots of folks whose Christian life is straight-laced, rule-bound, burdensome and joyless, which in turn tends to make them dour, narrow-minded, and compulsively obsessed about sin, sexual morality, and guilt. For people like these, faith is a burden.

So what are we to make of this morning's familiar words? —“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.” In Jesus' day and culture, the rabbis sometimes used the image of the yoke of the Torah, so it's understandable how inflammatory it was for Jesus to say that *his* yoke was easy, and *his* burden was light. The people he was speaking to could easily be forgiven for assuming that he meant, “Forget about the old ways of believing and living. Follow me and you'll find my way less demanding.”

Of course that's not what he meant, yet it's also true that Jesus was interpreting the law in a new, faithful, and beautiful way. He was teaching people to have unwavering confidence in the goodness and mercy of a God who wasn't a stern judge, scorekeeper, or taskmaster but rather a loving Father. Like the prophets he was calling out injustice whenever he encountered it. But in so doing, he became unacceptable to the power brokers of the day. So unacceptable did he become that they tried to silence him, but

he kept on talking. They tried to stop him, but he kept going. They tried to kill him, but he wouldn't die.

In his book *The Future of Faith*, Harvey Cox talks about the difference between faith and belief. In the years of the early Church, which he calls the Age of Faith, followers simply embraced the teachings of Jesus. Then, in the so-called 'Constantinian' era—he calls it the Age of Belief—church leaders increasingly took control of, and set acceptable limits on, doctrine and teaching; *faith* was supplanted by *belief*. He writes:

"It is true that for many people "faith" and "belief" are just two words for the same thing. But they are not the same ... Faith is about deep-seated confidence. In everyday speech we usually apply it to people we trust or the values we treasure ... Belief, on the other hand, is more like an opinion. [Beliefs] can be held lightly or with emotional intensity, but they are more propositional than existential."

There's no doubt Jesus was a liberator, an emancipator, who sought to relieve people of the anxious care and unbearable burdens of their religious lives and systems. But he didn't come proclaiming a new religion. In some sense he came to proclaim an *end* to religion—or at least an end to the religions of fear and repression. He came to loose the yokes of oppression of all kinds, and to teach that loving God isn't about following rules and believing propositions, but is rather about a way of faithful living which is open to the grace that we are loved and accepted as we are, who we are, and where we are.

Believing all this is easier said than done, of course. We're not so very different from those who first heard Jesus, especially in the various ways we're caught up in—and bound by—the assumptions and expectations of church, society, and family. And we know very well how it feels to be weary and heavy laden—not only physically and mentally, but spiritually, too.

I realize what I'm saying sounds facile, and maybe even like yet another of the preacher's abstractions, especially since a few chapters later on from this morning's reading in the gospel of Matthew Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." That's a variation—an amplification—of what we just heard: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me." He isn't saying this in some simplistic, naive way. Neither is he making a statement of belief. No: this is a call to action. It's a summons to faith. Faith which isn't a burden since we bear—share?—its yoke with our fellow pilgrims. Faith that to take on Christ's yoke—his cross—is to find the delight, joy, and confidence that's so often elusive. Faith that true freedom is found in the ultimate act of surrender.

You see, faith is akin to trust, just as belief is akin to anxiety. The gnawing, persistent anxieties of this present time are relieved and defeated only by the faith that we are beloved by God and supported by Jesus—and so is everyone else. Kierkegaard said

that faith is like floating in seventy thousand fathoms of water. That is to say, faith is the thing that buoys us up.

And so I end with a poem by Denise Levertov. It's called "The Avowal":

*As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them;
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.*