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There are times when it is easy to proclaim "God is good". There are times when a desire to honor and follow God appears to be best and easy to submit to. In those times living and acting out of our faith comes naturally.

Yet, for most, those times are not the norm of life. Times come when our experiences and expectations differ vastly, times when our experience does not match us with how we expect God's will to be carried out. There are times when we pray for things which would be easy for God to do, yet God doesn't. Times when we can find deep kinship with John the Baptist, who once proclaimed and baptized then found himself imprisoned and questioning. We do expect that following God's will does lead us to life, abundant and free, then experience that we have been led into the thick of the battle, that salvation, faithful living, is as Paul wrote, to be worked out with fear and trembling.

As vast as the differences between the Biblical stories shared from Genesis and Matthew are, they share an important common thread, a thread that is woven through our experiences as a nation and as people in the world today. They are stories which confront the difficulties and disappointments, the misunderstandings and misguided motives, which are a part of life. What does one who believes do when being a good person doesn't result in a good situation? Why should one agree to be "yoked", should one leave all behind and go? How is success measured when the life and ministry of the one we are to represent was anything but successful as we understand success to be? Should we expect anything out of our faith, of our God, in this life time, or is it only about "life after"?

Abraham heeded God's call, he left behind and moved into the unknown. He lived for many years waiting for God's promise, even tried to help bring the promise into reality by his own power and scheming. Yet he finds himself at what many scholars believe to be death's door, with just a glimpse of any possibility that the promise will be fulfilled. He has a son, one son, a son born at an extraordinary time of his life, yet only one son. Remember this is in a day and age when death, early death, was a norm, when few parents did not experience the loss of one or more of their offspring. One son was not a solid guarantee of descendents, of the family line being carried on generation through generation. Yet this time Abraham does not try to work a deal, to scheme or to exhort his power. Abraham returns to and acts from his understanding of faith and God's will. Abraham sends a trusted one to do what Abraham understands to be God's way. He sends a servant to find a wife for his son, his only son, from his family, as was tradition. Many scholars opine that Abraham did not expect to live to see the return of the servant or marriage of his son. Yet he did not forgo the way of God in order to have one or more daughters-in-law who were convent and near and perhaps see the next child born.

What radical faith it is that believes in God's promises even when it is apparent that these promises will not be realized in one's lifetime.

The servant also provides an interesting insight into faithfulness in the midst of confusion. Imagine being charged with such an important task. Imagine trying to sort out in your mind the criteria for choosing, not only a wife for another, but for choosing the one who would be an instrument in God's plan. This servant acknowledges his inability and places his trust fully in God. The method seems foolhardy – and even as it unfolded he must have had his doubts. Yet much like laying out a fleece, the servant asks that God provide the "next best step" and trusts as it unfolds.

Jesus speaks to the experiences and expectations of those who would call themselves faithful around him. This "generation" he speaks of were not the degenerates of the day and age. They were people who I suspect saw themselves as good folk; they were people who had faith and believed, yet acted out of their own desires, expecting that what God wanted was their happiness, in the here and now (or should I say there and then). These were the people who questioned anything and anyone who called their lives into question. John the Baptist called for repentance, for the stripping away of those things which distracted the heart of life from God. Jesus invited them to question the "why" behind the "what" of their ways of worshipping and obeying God. Jesus called them to see the powerlessness of acts which did not flow from a love of and surrender to God that was radical enough to impact all of life, and had the power to, as Jesus had stated just a little earlier in Matthew, divide one from those they loved best.

Faithful living was not easy, is not easy. The promises of God are not about heaven on earth, or escaping or gaining. The verse which ends the reading from Matthew is one which is so often quoted, is also often heard out of context and bent by translation. Yoking always involves surrender of will and obedience. A yoke is simply a wooden frame fitted across the necks of two oxen or other draft animals for *joining them together* as they pull a plow or a wagon. The purpose of a yoke is to distribute and lighten the load between two animals, to "join them together" ("at-one-ment"?). In this imposing analogy, it is as though Jesus is saying, "when you are heavy laden, when the way is too hard, come to Me, submit to My yoke — always a double yoke with Me on the other side. When I am working beside you, your load will feel light, the yoke will feel easy on your shoulders, because my unlimited strength will make up the difference for your weakness." Being yoked does not mean there is no burden, nor does it mean that one hands over their load to another.

The word translated as "easy" might have been translated as "kind". Perhaps this might better prepare us for carrying the burdens we will face. A kind yoke is one that is constructed and fitted to enable each animal to utilize its strength with consideration for both function and comfort. A well-built, kind yoke allows the two joined together to maximize the strengths of each. There is a non-biblical story which supposes that prior to beginning his ministry Jesus was one of the master yoke-makers in the Nazareth area. People came from miles around for a yoke, hand carved and crafted by Jesus, son of Joseph.

When customers arrived with their team of oxen Jesus would spend considerable time measuring the team, their height, the width, the space between them, and the size of their shoulders. Within a week, the team would be brought back and he would carefully place the

newly-made yoke over the shoulders, watching for rough places, smoothing out the edges and fitting them perfectly to this particular team of oxen. Then the oxen would be able to do the best possible work and experience the greatest comfort.

Understanding the work involved with being yoked adds understanding to the "rest" which is promised. Doing the work of faithfulness does result in some tiredness, not a tiredness indicating an ill-fitting yoke or being over burdened, but the tiredness which comes with the giving of ourselves. When we live faithful, purpose filled lives, when we turn our focus from self to the ways of God, then we are able to "rest" when it is time. There is no guilt associated with that which is beyond our control or power. This ability to rest has as much to do with our priorities and purpose as with any physical activity. Richard Foster writes of how we can connect our lives with Christ in practical ways to deepen the yoking and resting experience. He challenges us to:

- "First, buy things for their usefulness rather than their status
- Second, reject anything that is producing an addiction in you.
- Third, refuse to be propagandized by the custodians of modern gadgetry.
- Fourth, learn to enjoy things without owning them.
- Fifth, develop a deeper appreciation for the creation.
- Sixth, look at a healthy skepticism at all "buy now, pay later" schemes.
- Seventh, obey Jesus' instructions about plain, honest speech.
- Eighth, reject anything that will breed the oppression of others.
- Ninth, shun all that distracts you from you main goal: "Seek first the kingdom of God."

None of these disciplines will come easy, yet each is kind, kind to self and to others. Each prepares us for those times when God does not do as we expect and we choose to respond to our disappointment or disillusionment with faith. Each invites us to discover anew that God is goodness and that God's goodness is steadfast, regardless of our experience or understanding. And each brings work and rest.

Difficultly, confusion or disappointments can be wonderful opportunities for living out one of the membership vows we have talked about in Confirmation, to represent Christ to the world. To live in faithful ways, centered, giving, trusting ways, when goodness seems to be absent indicates our belief in the goodness of God which is universal and eternal. It is filled with the grace which makes life – life; the grace which we receive when we come to the table, not as a rote exercise of the church, but as an act of faithfulness in the midst of living. Coming to the table indicates a willingness to take the yoke upon us and to give our lives to the plan and purpose of God.