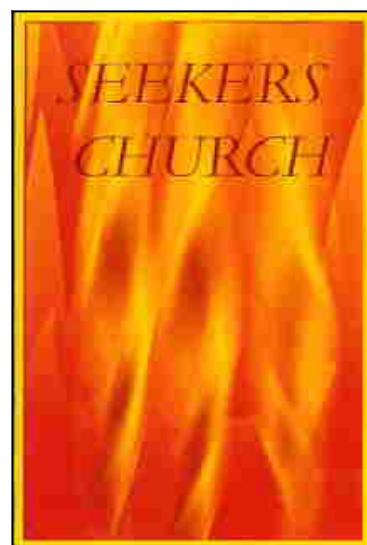


# “Yoked Together” by Marjory Bankson

July 6, 2008



Text: Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30 ...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.

This week I fished my work boots out of the downstairs closet to get ready for the Faith At Work Pilgrimage to Guatemala later this month – and found that the cat had been using them as a hide-away for some time. I’ve cleaned them up and sprinkled soda inside to take away odors and have been wearing them to walk in each morning.

All of this year's pilgrims are a little nervous about how much hard physical work we can do at 5,000 feet. Some are worrying about getting the right food, others worry about forgetting to brush their teeth with bottled water. Suddenly basic things like blisters and bathrooms loom larger than they usually do.

Because we've been there before, Peter and I also look forward to the stunning beauty of the countryside, and the warm welcome that we can anticipate in a village that we've never seen before. But we're also thinking about the difference between being a tourist—where you go as a spectator and buy what you want—and a pilgrim, where you go with empty hands and expect to be changed. On this Fourth of July weekend, I hope you've come to worship as a pilgrim, not a tourist.

Beyond celebrating American independence, I hope we can also celebrate our local and global interdependence.

The text for today starts with a basic rural image that you may only have seen in pictures—of being “yoked” in order to carry a heavy burden. Working people in Jesus' day were often little more than beasts of burden for the ruling class. In Third World countries today, yokes are still used to carry goods, to balance or share large loads. We will see people carrying heavy loads in Guatemala, especially if we get up early enough to see people setting up the market in Chichicastenango. Using a tumpline across the forehead, men will carry huge loads of heavy lumber to set up stalls and everywhere, we will see women and children carrying wood that way for cooking. Last year, some of us used a tumpline to carry sand and gravel up a steep hill to the water tank we were building with the men of the village. It's hard work, and the indigenous people of Guatemala do it ALL the time.

Matthew tells us that Jesus says simply, “Com to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” Surely he means “set your burden down and I'll

give you a cup of cold water.” Last week, Emily talked about that text as the basis for her call to offer hospitality at Goodwin House. Or maybe it means, “Stop your stressful schedule. Come away with me. Rest your weary head in my lap.” But no! Matthew tells us that Jesus says “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.” Jesus’ yoke is somehow different—not demeaning or harsh. It is restful, easy and light. How can that be?

Looking closely at the text we see that Jesus’ yoke is not about escape, or even release. It seems to be about interdependence, about sharing the load, and finding rest for our souls in the midst of our work.

The question then becomes, how can we be yoked with Jesus in our daily lives?

## **Being Yoked**

One answer here at Seekers is the list of spiritual practices that we expect of all members. At the beginning of Seekers, we adopted the framework for membership which had been developed by Church of the Saviour (found on p. 170 of the Seekers Story):

- \* weekly worship;
- \* daily inward journey time (prayer, scripture and journaling);
- \* weekly written report;
- \* proportional giving to Seekers, beginning at 5%;
- \* attendance at monthly member’s meetings;
- \* yearly retreat;

- \* belonging to a covenant group;

- \* yearly review of membership vows.

When I first looked at that list, I saw “requirements.” I wondered how it would feel to do all those things. Would it feel like a heavy burden? Hoops to jump through? A yoke that would chafe and press on my freedom? It raised the question for me: Did I even want to be a member of Seekers if those were the expectations?

The biggest stumbling blocks on that list for me were the weekly written report and giving to Seekers. You might find something else to balk at, but I would guess that nobody in our individualized culture likes to be told what we have to do in order to belong. I was grateful though, that the guidelines for membership were right out there in front of me. That was a start.

Writing papers for my classes in the School of Christian Living actually helped me get in the practice of sharing my spiritual life with someone else and over time, I realized that these weren't like high school papers which would be graded—but a chance to reflect on my spiritual life that I wouldn't do for myself. Sometimes I take a biblical image—like this one of being yoked with Jesus—and look at my life through that lens.

Figuring out the financial piece took more time. Peter and I had been giving substantially to Faith At Work before we arrived at Seekers, and we also had other places that we were used to giving.

As I recall, it was easier to work toward a tithe of 10% on Peter's regular salary than it was for me to give a percentage of my small income from selling pottery at the Torpedo Factory. I felt embarrassed that the amount was so small some months, and it was hard for me to find the will to do it.

But over time, I noticed something else was happening. As I began to speak up for Faith At Work within this community, and other people began to participate in FAW events, I was more able to ask that Seekers give some support to FAW through “community passions.”

What began as a requirement for membership has become (for me) an invitation to become an advocate, maybe an evangelist, and possibly a missionary of sorts. The best part is that many of you have come to Guatemala on a Faith At Work Pilgrimage, and you have encouraged one another to participate. Once that happened, it was easier to make a substantial gift to FAW through our domestic giving and to PAVA, the Guatemalan organization that we work with, through our international giving. Being yoked together with other Seekers in giving helped to lighten the “burden” of more individualized giving.

## **Money as a Spiritual Matter**

I’ve learned a lot from Pat about considering all of our wealth as a gift from God. Giving through Seekers has become a way to support and bless the ministries that we are all involved in. And when it was necessary to give or loan money for the renovation of this building, we were able to do it from within the congregation rather than going to a bank or mortgage company. Now that’s a counter-cultural way of being yoked together!

As we complete the first half of 2008, I can tell you that this little congregation has a total budget of \$282,000—and we have already given 50% of that amount. In other words, the culture of generosity at Seekers is flowing freely—but it takes intentionality and sacrifice from all of us.

Just so you know:

- \* We give 28% of our budget to others where we are personally involved;

- \* we use 7% for internal community life, bringing the

total to 35%.

- \* we allocate 40% for our building and our “ministry of place” right here;

- \* spend 20% on staff;

- \* and plan 5% for repayment of our renovation loans.

Everyone has a chance to participate. Recipients for our giving to others, and the amounts, are decided by whoever gathers after worship one Sunday in the Fall. It’s about letting money become a way to notice the places where we are bound by cultural values, and where we have experienced the freedom that Jesus offered. His yoke is easy; his burden is light.

For the past two weeks, I’ve been part of a Small Church Conference at Virginia Seminary. On one session about money, we learned that the average American carries about \$9,000 of debt on their credit cards...and spends 18% on interest for that debt while giving about 1.5% of their income (on average) to the church. “What are you doing,” the speaker said, “to help people get their debts under control and find purpose in other ways?”

I thought with some gratitude about the session that Aeren and Jeannine offered in our last “Third Sunday” discussion, about steps we could take toward sustainable living for all of us on this planet. Belonging to Seekers can be a way to encourage one another toward Jesus’ vision of shalom for all— especially those who are burdened by the wants and whims of others.

It’s also clear to me that the spiritual practices which we inherited from Church of the Saviour have not always been good news for everyone. This week, Living Water mission group has been putting together a sample memory book to encourage all of you to prepare a page in your own way. As I retyped Muriel’s page to go around her picture [hold up album], I was struck by this paragraph which I am simply going to read:

Commitment (daily prayer, annual retreat, mission group experience) was my most significant attraction to the Church of the Saviour. It was also my most difficult practice, especially when our fourth child arrived. I could not keep my disciplines, so I dropped out of membership in favor of commitment to my family. But I was soon back in again.

At Seekers, I think Muriel's quandary would more likely be a matter of confession in her weekly report, because we have understood this framework to be a deepening practice rather than a rigid set of rules. We expect all of our spiritual disciplines to be a matter of growing consciousness that will help us stay yoked with Jesus, pulling whatever burdens we are given to carry together.

In 1991, when we decided to open membership to anyone who wanted to be intentional about their spiritual journey with Seekers, the Staff Team offered a set of reflection questions which can be a guide for all of us who want to be yoked with Jesus. You can find them in Appendix 15 of the Seekers Story.

- *Worship. Is worship with Seekers a priority for me? Am I fed by it? What might I offer to enrich worship for others?*
- *Finance. Can I commit to proportional giving rather than discretionary giving? Are there ways in which I would like to participate in the budget development and spending decisions of the community?*
- *Spiritual Growth. Are the practices of daily quiet time and other disciplines a priority? Do I want a shepherding or spiritual guidance relationship?*
- *Call. What is my call and how am I living it out? If I am unaware or unsure of my call, what steps might I take to discern it?*
- *Group Life. What commitments am I willing to make to being*

*part of a Seekers group?*

*Inclusion. Do I support the children's programs? Are these connections life-giving or primarily an obligation? How might they be more life giving?*

As we come to the communion table on this holiday weekend, let us celebrate the gift of interdependence that Jesus offered to his followers...and to us:

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. Amen.