**The Yoke of Christ and the Burden of Covid19**

**Cooke’s-Portsmouth**

**July 5, 2020**

**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

How shall we remember this generation living with and hopefully emerging from-at some future date- a world- wide pandemic? Some are suffering from Covid Burnout. Those who have been working from home are finding it challenging to have any separation between work and a private life. Little distinction between work and home, and, an accompanying lack of affirmation on work completed are having serious impact on an individual’s soul and psyche. Others are concerned about unemployment and even those who received some of the financial benefits from the Federal Government when the country was in effect shut down are worried about mortgages, car payments and bills. Even the reward of a vacation where one can get away from the reality of isolation, distancing, and frustration seems illusive as borders remain closed and travel destinations restricted. Most of us have grown frustrated with limited social interaction.

School graduations have taken place virtually or over several days to allow for social distancing. We are weary of living with restrictions on freedom that we have long taken for granted. We now need to make reservations on patios that once we simply showed up to. Restaurants remained closed and will reopen with limited seating. Churches as well will be limited to 30% capacity when allowed to reopen. And both sacred and secular space will need to adhere to strict protocols on sanitizing, wearing of masks and distancing.

We anticipated opening soon after the go ahead was announced by the Premier on June 12, but needed to revisit the decision in light of recommendations from our denominational governing body.

In order to have as much control as possible over the spread of the virus we were asked to conduct a risk assessment and to put protocols in place. It became quickly apparent that simply restricting the attendance to 30% capacity was but one protocol, and sanitizing of hands and surfaces and restrictions on singing and sundry other practices, that had been our normal practice for worship, would be replaced with a new normal. And while we were well down the path to reopen, we needed to have our protocols rubber stamped by governing bodies and displayed on signs and invitations before proceeding. How shall we remember this time in our shared history with one another and the world?

Has it been the best of times? The worst of times? Have we gained insight into ourselves and our families as we have experienced limited access to others? Was Easter more meaningfully celebrated in the quiet of isolation or did we miss particular persons and traditions that have usually marked the day? Have we discovered that perhaps we are more introverted or extraverted than we once thought? What has the learning curve been as many have navigated working from a home office, and learning online? For our children how has it been spending the day with adults and not with peers? And what of our need for Christian community?

Have we discovered that our spiritual needs are being well met by staying at home and enjoying a second cup of coffee in pajamas as we tune into web sites and services provided- not only by our community- but by other ministers and denominations? Have we discovered another minister that engages more readily or have we realized that tuning into worship is something that we have dispensed doing as new religions have replaced the old: like mastering the Los Angeles Times Sunday Crossword puzzle, or baking bread, watching CNN or other programing that is on air when normally we have gathered together in sacred space? What is it that we have missed the most about not being able to gather together?

Is it the minister, the music, the company or have we discovered-whether we are loathe to confess it or not- that our Sunday’s –and by extension our week-has unfolded largely unaffected by not gathering together? I confess that I have discovered the LA Times Sunday Crossword Puzzle that I download and solve over coffee as my husband sleeps; feeling as though I have worshipped while recording a reflection earlier in the week. I have had moments when I have wondered if I should be surfing around the net to hear what is being said by whom on a given Sunday so I may seek out a congregation after I retire. But as yet, I have not done so. You see, as often as not, it is not primarily the minister who is the tipping agent in the decision to become affiliated with congregation; it is the community.

One needs to feel as though one is welcome; that people have noticed the new person or family in attendance and will reach out in welcome. That will be hard to do as social distancing and restrictions on handshaking and close interaction will be discouraged for the immediate future. Will Covid19 begin to sound the knell for the church as more people become comfortable with worshipping from home? Will live streaming and posting to you tube and Facebook become the new Amazon warehouse of the church? Reflection and prayers a click away. And so the poignant question on the lips of Jesus posed in the gospel lesson for this morning is truly evocative: But to what will I compare this generation? For the generation that Jesus ministered to the answer was like bratty children who want everything to be done according to their wish and whim.

There is truth to the adage that we cannot please all of the people all of the time. It would appear that this was the case for Jesus as we hear him in the opening verses of the text for this morning as he compares himself to John. The two men could hardly have been more different.

John lived the life of a hermit in the wilderness; feasting on locusts and wild honey and not imbibing in drink. Jesus lived in the community, and enjoyed feasting with friends. As a result of their life style choices people thought that John was demon possessed and labelled Jesus a drunkard and a glutton because his life was far less ascetic than John. It would appear that regardless of the person that God sends to engage and inspire, the people can take exception.

Through parable, Jesus compares his audience to fickle children playing in the marketplace, and, who keep changing the rules of the game. John came neither feasting nor drinking and some found this too old school for their taste. So they played the flute and encouraged the aesthetic to join them in the dance; have a little fun; lighten up. Jesus, on the other hand, was eager to dance. He loved to dine at the table whenever he could. His only rule was that no one be denied because of status. This garnered him the label of drunkard, glutton and caused some to view him with disdain because of the company that he kept. It was difficult to please the people. If Jesus found it challenging to be all things to all people, then what makes us think that we can be all things to all people?

Too strict is still as equally as distasteful as too lenient. We want the happy medium between John’s stern and strict no nonsense teaching and the inclusive gospel of Christ. We desire a happy medium between that which is too restrictive and that which is judged as too accommodating. So we, too, want to change our tune; insisting on moderation and mediocrity; not wanting to rock the boat with too many, or conversely, too few demands.

One day recently the postie came into the building and unplugged her headphones from her radio and shared that she had just been listening to a CBC program on Covid Fatigue. Now in addition to Covid Burnout and Covid Anxiety there is now a phenomenon labeled Covid Fatigue. People are just tired of even hearing about it. We hear that there will be a news report on the second wave, or new cases and eyes glaze over. There is fear among caring professionals that people will throw caution to the wind and not only put themselves at risk, but also spread the virus in the community. And Covid Fatigue is exacerbated by the leadership in the United States eschewing its reality and making jokes about limiting testing to skew the results of new cases.

We have grown weary of living with the pandemic. And weary of the restrictions. And weary of wondering how long we will need to live like this. Weary of being unable to make plans. Tired of feeling guilty about being unable to do our jobs effectively because we are prohibited from visiting in homes and hospitals, and, must exist in a bubble. The reality is as much with us as it was with Jesus who was motivated to ask but to what will I compare this generation? His answer? Like bratty children who want only their own way. But then, after he acknowledges the challenging reality with which he lives and must work, Jesus does not admonish or wash his hands of the brats, he is moved to pray for them and to encourage them to come to him for comfort and understanding. And so as we live with a host of issues, disappointments and realities exacerbated by a worldwide pandemic it is to prayer and the invitation of Jesus that we must turn.

Come to me all weary and beleaguered and I will give you rest. Become yoked to the Son of God and learn and rest in the comfort of grace. Those of us who are more urban that rural may not entirely appreciate the metaphor of the yoke.

A yoke is a farming implement that joins two animals, such as oxen, together so that the animals can share the workload evenly and become more productive. Sometimes, an older, more experienced animal is yoked with a younger, less experienced animal, so that the older animal can train the younger animal while they work together.

Becoming yoked to Christ does not mean that the work of tilling the ground will be made mysteriously easy. We still need to contend with rocks that stymie the process, and clay that can be unforgiving. Some days will still feel as though we take two steps forward and one step back. The burden of Covid19 we will have with us for some time to come, but with the yoke of Christ we can trust that we can rely on the strength and wisdom of the experienced partner to encourage and support. May the yoke of Christ temper for all of us the nemesis of Covid Burnout, Covid Anxiety and Covid Fatigue. Amen.