

WGUMC August 18, 2013 "Learn From Me"
Micah 4:1-4 and Matthew 11:28-30

Are you smarter than a fifth grader? I can remember thinking that I was pretty darn smart in the fifth grade and now realize that I kept getting dumber every year after that. Fifth graders are the lucky ones. They have a school where they can go to learn what they need to know. But once the degrees are all granted, where can the adults go? Where can we learn what we need to know? I'm afraid that too often we grownups end up in that old broken-down building called the School of Hard Knocks.

The Prophet Micah has another idea. "'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion will go forth instruction." [4:2] So, you middle and high school students, whenever your teachers start acting like gods, just remember that God is your Teacher.

My daughter seems to like most of her teachers at Willow Glen this year. I'm happy of that. But I'm not too thrilled about all the books and notebooks these kids have to carry around all day. Have you ever lifted one of their backpacks? When I was a kid, we didn't need luggage. We had lockers. So I wonder how many of them go to the chiropractor's office after school. At least I know where the backpacks go the minute they come home from school: on the floor, just inside the door.

That backpack lying there makes me wonder where do adults put down their burdens? And what are we carrying around on our backs that weighs so much, and do we ever let ourselves put it down? Jesus says, "'Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'" I bet some of us are carrying a load of guilt and a long list of regrets. Some of us are carrying the baggage of past relationships or the crushing weight of current ones. Some of us are saddled with unbearable amounts of stress. Some of us

are lugging around aching bodies, wounded spirits, and broken hearts. And for some ungodly reason, we can't or won't put these burdens down. To us, Jesus says, "'Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'"

Of course there's a catch. In the very next breath, he says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me..." And we're thinking: sounds an awful lot like school. What does Jesus want us to learn?

Here's the Cliff Note version. Get out your pens and notebooks. Think about his first sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth where he taught Lesson Number One: that he came to bring good news to the poor. [Luke 4:18] And what was that good news? That God so loved the world that he sent the Son into the world not to condemn it but to save it. [John 3:17]

The Good News is that God loves us enough to forgive us. And that *is* good, as long as we learn Lesson Number Two: how to love and forgive others. For God can't give us what we refuse to give others. [Matthew 6:14-5] But how many times do we have to forgive? Peter asked: "As many as seven times?" Jesus answered: seventy-seven times. [Matthew 18:22] That's pretty crazy, but then again, so is God's grace.

It's a pretty long journey. So we need Lesson Number Three: No matter how hard it is, no matter how long it takes, no matter how low we go, Jesus teaches us to never, ever lose heart. That's why he rode the donkey, why he cleansed the temple, why he stood before Pilate and bent under the lash and wore the crown of thorns and died on a cross and was laid in a tomb. We figured all was lost and then we discovered that, in the end, love won.

It's the Christian life in a nutshell: loving, forgiving, and living. This is what we're supposed to learn. But how are we

supposed to learn it? And how can we possibly live it? Jesus gives us a clue when he says, "Take my yoke upon you..."

Now we often think of a yoke as a symbol of oppression, an unbearable burden, as in the yoke of slavery. But it's also a symbol of relationship, a blessed bond, as in the yoke of marriage or friendship. And that's the way Jesus is using "yoke" here. When we are yoked with Jesus, we are in a loving relationship with God.

I'm going to stop here to say that I know that there are folk who will start squirming when I talk about being in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, because that language just doesn't resonate with you, because it makes God a little too small for you. It makes God sound like someone who would borrow your jeans or sleep in your bed. But I want to assure you that there are other ways to think about this intimate connection we have with Christ.

Wrap your mind around this one: because the divine met the human in the person of Jesus, the divine can meet the human in us. Because of Jesus, we can have a deep sense of connection—on the synaptic, the cellular level—with God, the "Ground" of our Being. Because of Jesus, we can have a spiritual consciousness that we are a part—precious and important but just a part—of a greater whole, a universal love. When we become incorporated into the life of God through Jesus Christ, we can feel the heartbeat of the universe pulsing through us. And that's a vitality in our spirit that we can't attribute to anything but the Spirit of God that breathes into all of us the breath of life. [Genesis 2:7] Anyway, that's another way of talking about this intimate relationship.

And so this is how we learn from Christ: by taking on the yoke. Through prayer, meditation, reading the Bible, gathering for worship, Christian fellowship, community service, we are discovering and nurturing this divine-human connection, and

dwelling in this relationship with God. "My yoke is easy," Jesus says, because it's so natural, so human, because this is what we were born for. This is the "original blessing" that we all want to get back to. Call it what you will, but Christ is calling us home.

So we get *what* we're supposed to learn and *how* we're supposed to learn, but *where* can we go to learn? Where is home?

Back to the image of the yoke. Yokes are not made for individuals. If we wear one, we're part of a team. And so the burden we bear is light because we aren't bearing it alone. Here in the church, we're all under the same yoke. We are all carrying the same load and, at the same time, confident that God is carrying us. So, you can drop out of the School of Hard Knocks and sign up here to be a student of our gentle, humble Teacher, and we can all learn together.

At Willow Glen, we learn as a family. Our mission statement says that we are "God's family growing through caring, sharing and serving." And our website says that "because our own families don't always work for us, the church must be the family where God's grace can work through us..."

We can't just talk about family. We have to do it. We have to be family for each other. That's even more important now, because we have too many families who are carrying heavy burdens and they need rest for their souls. We are called to make their yoke easier and their burden lighter. Our fall program is designed with this very task in mind. So we are planning a new, no-homework, no-stress Bible study starting in September. Adult Sunday School will reconvene in the library. We'll do a new book study and schedule some family nights at Woodhaven. And, by the grace of God, the pastor will begin a blog.

You know, I've always wanted to write an advice column. I read "Ask Amy" every day and, in my head, I find myself writing Christian responses to the letters she receives. I might as well write them down. I'll make up some questions—or you can send me some—about loving, living, and forgiving. And if we get some good conversation going, we can make each other's yoke easier and burden lighter. We can create some virtual and spiritual space to put down our packs, set down the suitcases, drop the duffle bags and find some rest for our souls.

We're all going to need it, because the only folks who graduate from the School of Christian Life are those who go on to the next life. This semester, we have a lot to learn from Christ and thank God we have time to learn it. So go up to the mountain to learn his ways and walk his paths. "For out of Zion shall go forth instruction." Remember to sharpen your minds as well as your pencils. Prepare your spirits as well as your sack

lunches. Open your hearts as well as your textbooks and listen to the one who says, "Learn from Me."