

An Invitation to Paradox **(Wearing the Yoke of Community)**

“Take my yoke upon you . . . for my yoke is easy”
(Matthew 11:29a, 30a)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, **July 16, 2017**
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When in 1985 I was the newly hired Administrator at First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan (the job that helped put me through graduate studies at the University of Michigan, focusing on Hebrew language and Semitic literature), my office window looked across our back parking lot to First Baptist Church. When First Baptist welcomed their new Senior Pastor, Dr. Jitsuo Morikawa, the local newspaper’s headline goof was worthy of being included in one of Jay Leno’s humorous headline segments. The *Ann Arbor News* announcement of the Installation service for the new pastor should have read, *The Installation of Dr. Morikawa*. Instead it was written, *The Insulation of Dr. Morikawa*, a snafu noticed and published by *The Christian Century* with a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that perhaps it was of a “Freudian” slip, since we naturally prefer *Insulation* to *Installation*.

I’ve been thinking about that wordplay since last Sunday’s Installation service led by our Staff Parish Relations Committee along with other leading lay servants of Christ of the Hills. Let’s think about two words this morning -- *Installation* and *Insulation*. I think there must be a sermon in there somewhere! Let me see if I can find it.

A family was worshiping in the sanctuary when a child, growing drowsy, laid her head in her father’s lap. Seeing her daughter so gently cushioned, mom leaned over and whispered to dad, “*There Henry, isn’t that sweet? You always did want to be a pillar of the church.*”

So, two more words, *Pillow* and *Pillar*. The similarity of sound despite the dissimilarity of meaning between the words *Pillow* and *Pillar* are precisely analogous to the similarity of sound and dissimilarity of meaning between *Insulation* and *Installation*.

A *Pillow* is a picture of *Insulation*, a cushion, a buffer, a shock absorber, encasing something within layers of protective softness (such as I’ve done this week, transporting things like T. V.s and computers and other breakables in our move to the Village.

A *Pillar*, on the other hand, represents the idea of *Installation*, which is quite the opposite. A pillar is exposed, vital to the infrastructure and, when acting in concert with other pillars, working to hold everything together.

My love for etymology leads me to point out that *Insulation* derives from the Latin word *insula*, which means “*alone*.” Think of the word *insula* in our word *pen-insula*. What’s a *peninsula*? A

piece of land jutting out into the sea, alone, buffered on three sides by water. *Aloneness* is the idea. When First Baptist Church welcomed Dr. Morikawa as pastor, they didn't intend to *Insulate* him, stick him out there all alone. No, but rather they intended to *Install* him, a word which means quite literally, "*in the stall.*" This etymology fits squarely into the domain of domesticated animals – oxen and horses not working alone, but "*yoked*" together to accomplish a task beyond what any one animal, acting alone, might accomplish.

I love the story of a young couple boarding a horse-drawn carriage for a romantic evening ride through Memphis around the famous Peabody Hotel and Beale Street. As she was being helped into the buggy, the young lady asked the name of the horse, and the carriage driver told her the horse's name was Jim. A few moments later, as the carriage jerked to begin its movement, the driver said, "*Giddy-up, Jim. Giddy-up, Sue. Giddy-up, Sam. Giddy-up, Joe.*"

"*Mister,*" the young lady laughed, "*there's only one horse.*"

"*Shhhh! You and I know that,*" the driver whispered with a smile, "*but if old Jim thought he was the only one pulling this buggy, he'd never budge an inch.*"

Seems old Jim thought he was yoked to others, and that brings me to Jesus' words upon which we are focusing this morning, "*Take my yoke upon you.*" I hear in those words an invitation to Wear the Yoke of Community, to walk in our disciple journey not alone but in concert with the gifts and energies of others. This was symbolized in our Installation service last Sunday, with lay servant leaders in areas of worship. I love it that *Christ of the Hills* has stoles of each liturgical color framed and hanging outside the sanctuary. Those stoles represent the yoke that binds clergy of the Arkansas Conference into a Connection.

If you will excuse a shameless pun, the question asked by Jesus when he says, "*Take my yoke upon you*" is, "*Can You Take a Yoke?*" (Don't ever let me get away with that again!)

One of America's political leaders nearly sixty years ago asked Americans a similar question. I began this morning by telling you about my experience in Ann Arbor when I arrived there in the summer of 1985. A few months later, October 14 to be precise, I walked down State Street only a few blocks from my office to the famous Michigan Union, where then Vice President George Herbert Walker Bush had been sent by President Reagan to speak on the steps of the Michigan Union on the occasion of the visit was the 25th anniversary of the Peace Corps.

Why celebrate the Peace Corps on the University of Michigan campus? Because Senator John F. Kennedy's 1960 speech on that very spot is recognized as the place where the Peace Corps was conceived. I wish I could have gone back to be on campus 25 years later, in 2010, for the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps, when close to 1,000 people gathered on October 14 at a rather odd hour -- 2:00 a.m.

Why 2:00 a.m.? Because at precisely that moment in 1960 then Senator John F. Kennedy arrived and spoke to a crowd of over 5,000 students and faculty awaiting his arrival. He had just finished the third of four televised debates with Richard Nixon in New York and had flown to Ann Arbor to begin campaigning in Michigan the next day, the election only three weeks away.

It was an unannounced visit, intended to sneak the senator in, to insulate him, to allow him to put his head on a pillow and catch a few hours of sleep.

It didn't work out that way. Word of his arrival leaked and when he stepped out of the car he saw over 5,000 students gathered. He felt he had to speak, and did for a spontaneous three minutes which may have changed the course of the campaign, inviting students to yoke their energies together for the greater good of mankind. A medallion on the top step of the Michigan Union reads, *The conception of the Peace Corps first mentioned on this spot, October 14, 1960.*



He began, *"I want to express my thanks to you, as a graduate of the Michigan of the East, Harvard University."* Then, growing serious, he said, *"How many of you who are going to be doctors are willing to spend your days in Ghana? Technicians or engineers, how many of you are willing to work in the Foreign Service and spend your lives traveling around the world? On your willingness to do that . . . to contribute part of your life to this country, I think will depend the answer whether a free society*



can compete. I think it can! And I think Americans are willing to contribute . . . So, I come here tonight . . . to go to bed! But I also come here tonight to ask you join in the effort – this is the longest short speech I've ever made, therefore, I'll finish it! Let me say in conclusion, this University is not maintained by its alumni or by the state merely to help its graduates have an economic advantage in the life struggle. There is certainly a greater purpose . . ."

Senator Kennedy had come to Ann Arbor for a few hours of pillowed insulation, but challenged the students to be installed as pillars of service, to *Wear the Yoke of Service*, to recognize that their education must look beyond achieving such personal advantage that they would be *Insulated* for life, but rather that they should be *Installed* into a mission with a Greater Purpose.

Only a few of the many reporters present filed stories on that impromptu speech, but the student body's instant enthusiasm about the idea energized the final weeks of the campaign and led to the creation of the Peace Corps which has seen hundreds of thousands of Americans Yoke themselves to the Greater Purpose of making a difference in the lives of others.

This led, three months later, to the famous conclusion of his Inaugural Address. “*And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country . . . what together we can do for the freedom of man. Finally, whether you are citizens of America or citizens of the world, ask of us here the same high standards of strength and sacrifice which we ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward . . . let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.*”

Our text from Matthew’s gospel is Jesus’ Call to men and women of faith to yoke themselves together in service so that the church would not be an *Insular* institution buffering us in some nirvana of spiritual aloneness, but a Service- and Mission-oriented body of Christ through which we might be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world.

To be sure, the image of a yoke on the necks of human persons may seem demeaning and discomforting. Do you sense the vulgarity of this image, wearing a device intended to harness the energies of beasts of burden? When Jesus says “*Take my yoke upon you,*” he’s saying to a fashion-conscious world, “*Do you look good wearing wood?*”

When Jesus says, “*Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest,*” it may be read as an *Invitation to Paradise*. Read on, though, and discover that this is no mere *Invitation to Paradise*, but an *Invitation to Paradox*, for his next words invite us to place upon our shoulders a yoke, an evocative image of the very labor from which he had just offered rest.

Jesus’ words remind me of those mounted in bronze at the Statue of Liberty, “*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*”

Just as Jesus’ words in Matthew’s gospel Invite us into Paradox – that our discipleship is not merely *Insulation*, but also *Installation*; so also the Statue of Liberty’s message seems to me to be an invitation to precisely the same paradox – not merely to offer insulated comfort to those coming to these shores, but also a requirement that those coming not be adversaries, but rather be willing to be yoked to the community they are wishing to join.

Well, I arrived at Christ of the Hills a week too late to celebrate our nation’s founding with you on July 4, but as it’s still July I hope you think it appropriate for me to celebrate our nation once again. Speaking of being yoked together, I love that our worship bulletin lists for prayer the many names of those in the circle of your family and friends who are serving in our nation’s armed forces. It is with special gratitude for these whose sacrifices have secured and are securing our liberty that I offer this message to the Glory of God and with gratitude for the Divine Providence that has made these United States of America such a beacon for Liberty in the world.

Amen.