I want to begin by saying how good it is to be home and I want to thank Jeanne and all of you for St. Paul’s generous, thoughtful practice of giving your clergy sabbatical time to rest and renew one’s spirit. The pilgrimage Lois and I made to western Ireland to learn and experience the riches of Celtic spirituality will stay with us for the rest of our lives and I am deeply grateful to all of you for that opportunity.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and 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.”

In my pocket New Testament from the Gideons this passage is listed in an index in the front under the heading, “Where To Find Help when Weary”. While it is tempting to hear these comforting words of Jesus as an invitation to escape life’s problems, such escape doesn’t “square up” with Jesus’ life and mission which led him to experience criticism for associating with sinners, abandonment by his closest friends, and death on the cross.

The context in which Jesus spoke these words makes this clear. At the beginning of the 11th chapter of Matthew John the Baptist, from his prison cell, sends disciples to Jesus asking if he is the promised Messiah. Jesus responds, “Tell John …”the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” Unfortunately, neither the prophetic ministry of John or the healing proclamation of Jesus were well-received. Yet, Jesus adamantly proclaims, “Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds”, not by popular acclaim. So how are we to understand what Jesus is saying to us about my yoke is easy and my burden is light?

I believe a key to understanding this text is found in Jesus’ prayer that precedes his invitation, a prayer in which he speaks of his relationship with the Father and the intimate love they share that freed him to take on the pain of the world by living from the knowledge that he is God’s beloved child. I think we are invited to pay careful attention to these words, “All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

In this text Jesus is telling us that there is more than one yoke in this world and invites you and me to choose which yoke we will bear in life. Will we take on the yoke the world espouses of pursuing success and meaning relying on our own resources or will we accept Jesus’ invitation to be yoked with him?

Henri Nouwen described what it is like to take on the heavy yoke of this world. The world, Nouwen says, teaches that what really matters is what I achieve; what others say about me, and what I possess. When I can point to diplomas on my wall, hear the approbation of my peers, and enjoy the material blessings for which I have labored I feel on top of the world. However, in life, these things, good as they are, come with limits don’t they? If my identity and sense of self-worth is dependent on achievement and possessions and what others say about me, I am always vulnerable. If the market falls
or my health declines or my child experiences addiction or my business fails or my spouse leaves me or someone defames my good name, I experience depression and worry and darkness. The yoke of this world requires me to spend every bit of energy I possess in holding on to what I have. It also leaves me feeling wary and suspicious of others, seeing them as threats or competitors in a zero sum game. Ultimately, it can leave us feeling betrayed when we face aging and death as we all must do.

Isn’t it interesting that when God’s Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for forty days after his baptism Satan tempted Jesus to put personal acclaim and power above his relationship with the Father. If he turned stones into bread; put God to the test by jumping off the temple and having angels catch him, if he bowed the knee to Satan in return for all the nations of the world bowing to him. But Jesus refused Satan’s offer because he saw how empty and ultimately hollow Satan’s promises are.

Instead, he trusted God’s love by which creation came into being and death has been overcome by resurrection, and in which we, too, are held and treasured as God’s beloved children. Because Jesus lived from the knowledge he is God’s beloved child, he can bear witness that there is another yoke that is life-giving even in the face of failure, rejection by others, and death.

The reason, I believe, the words of Jesus are so comforting is that Jesus offers to yoke himself to us. He invites us to give up our solitary effort to find meaning and purpose in life by what we achieve and own and what others say about us and to join him in a common effort, grounded in our identity as God’s beloved children. Jesus invites you and me into the intimate relationship he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit, inviting us to yoke ourselves to the very source of love and life that wills the redemption all people and restoration of creation itself.

Elizabeth Johnson offers this comment on Jesus’ promise, “Come to me…and I will give you rest.” “It is not that Jesus invites us to a life of ease. Following him will be full of risks and challenges, as he has made abundantly clear. He calls us to a life of humble service, but it is a life of freedom and joy instead of slavery. It is life yoked to Jesus under God’s gracious and merciful reign, free from the burden of sin and the need to prove oneself, free to rest deeply and securely in God’s grace.”

Sufi writer Idries Shah tells this story that speaks of the challenges of accepting Jesus’ yoke.

“A stream, from its source in far-off mountains, at last reached the sands of the desert. Just as it had crossed every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but it found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared.

Now a hidden voice, coming from the desert itself, whispered: ‘The wind crosses the desert, and so can the stream.’ The stream objected that it was dashing itself against the sand, and only getting absorbed—that the wind could fly, and this was why it could cross a desert.

‘By hurtling in your own accustomed way you cannot get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over, to your destination.’

‘But how could this happen?’

‘By allowing yourself to be absorbed in the wind. The wind performs this function. It takes up water, carries it over the desert, and then lets it fall again. Falling as rain, the water again becomes a stream.
‘How can I know this is true?’

‘It is so, and if you do not believe it, you cannot become more than a quagmire, and even that could take many, many years; and it certainly is not the same as a stream.’

‘But can I not remain the same stream that I am today?’

‘You cannot in either case remain so,’ the whisper said. ‘Your essential part is carried away and forms a stream again. You are called what you are even today because you do not know which part of you is the essential one—your form or your function.

What is a stream? Its water content—or its meandering shape and purpose? In allowing ourselves to be transformed by life, by God’s action, we may sometimes feel we are losing our essential selves. But this doubting and questioning is all part of casting ourselves on the Divine wisdom, willing ourselves to be carried over to the next stage.”

Are you willing to be shaped by God’s purpose for your life or will you retreat in fear of what God’s transforming love might require of you? This question cuts to the heart of what we believe, where we will place our trust. The truth is that we always bind ourselves, however subtly, to something: people, places, habits, possessions, beliefs, ways of being in the world.

To what or to whom are you yoked right now? Have you chosen these connections, or have you allowed them to be placed upon you by others? Are they life-giving or deadening? Remember Jesus’ words, “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” God’s liberating power will not fail in its healing, reconciling, redemptive work. While it is not an escape from this world’s burdens, yoking ourselves with Jesus is the way to real life in which we are connected to a mission that matters and buoyantly sustained by the love of God.