

Kids’ time – pictures of ill-fitting shoes; Jesus’ yoke FITS

When I was young, I rode horses with an elderly man named Mr. Snead. Mr. Snead had three horses and I had one, so he and I would routinely take two horses out on the trail, jumping over fallen trees and jumps he had set up, enjoying each other’s company, and then we would come in, saddle up the other two horses, and go back out for another couple of hours. For years, my Saturdays and Sunday afternoons were dedicated to my time with my horse and Mr. Snead.

One of the things Mr. Snead taught me early on was the value of receiving a leg-up. He had an old Thoroughbred mare who was quite tall, and Mr. Snead would always give me a leg-up so that I could get up onto her back. The receiver of the leg-up bends his/her knee, and the giver of the leg-up puts an arm under the knee and provides lift for the receiver. Physics make it possible for even a small person to give a large person quite a nice lift.

As Christians, we often find ourselves needing a “leg-up” in terms of our faith, especially when we find ourselves “thrown” by difficult circumstances in our lives or even by our own attitudes or actions.

In the Gospel lesson Jesus offers us a powerful “leg-up” as he says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” The “rest” he offers is not inactivity; it is the peace that comes from letting Jesus help you deal with your life through a “yoke” that will fit you, that will be specially made to distribute the weight of the burdens so that they will not weaken you....The “rest” includes the offer to learn from him.... By this and by this and only by this will we find rest for our souls.

In his book, *Cups of Light*, the late Baptist preacher Clarence Cranford offered a story I have used over and over again because of its profound truth and simplicity.

Cranford told of a little boy who found an old ox-yoke in a barn. He wanted some fun, so he put one side of the yoke over the neck of a calf and the other side of the yoke over his own head. The calf didn’t see the fun of it, so the calf bolted, dragging the little boy across the barnyard. The boy screamed, “Help, somebody, we’re running away!” (*From Cups of Light, Clarence Cranford*)

It’s easy to get yoked to things that run away with us. Anxiety, envy, anger, resentment, fear. You name it. We need to look at our lives and see and name what we are “yoked” to, what is dragging us down or through life and keeping us from letting GOD be our Shepherd, the One we are asked to trust to lead and take care of us. God’s yoke is the way to life: It will fit perfectly, it will be lined with forgiveness, and it will lead to joy!

Now, another story, a total change of pace, a story that my husband came up with several years ago. I share it today because it speaks to me of our mixed motives and God’s power to work

through us in spite of us. We call this story “The Softball Church.”

The old white church building had stood empty for several years now. When the last minister retired there was really no one left to keep things going. A few old timers came on Sundays for a while, but soon the doors were shut and the utilities disconnected. The younger generation hadn't picked up when the older folks got too old to keep going. Some of the younger ones said that the old folks never would let them have a say, the old folks said the youngsters weren't very religious. At any rate the building stood empty and the town began to talk of condemning the place.

That's when some of the younger guys got an idea. They needed a place for the softball team to meet, and the church owned a big field out back. Why not, they reckoned, reclaim the building, call it a church to keep the property off the tax rolls, and have a social club where they could meet to play soft ball every weekend? It would be perfect! Though some of the team felt a little funny about using the pretense of a church in such a way, the idea caught on and a new "church" was formed.

So that the town would not become suspicious, the team met on Sunday mornings at 10:00 to plan out the spring schedule. Everything was going smoothly--the guys talked about the team, their wives chatted in the old fellowship hall, and the kids ran up and down between the pews. Then it happened: On about the sixth week a visitor came to the church just as the families were gathering there. Everyone walked into the sanctuary and after a few nervous moments the second baseman got up the nerve to read a few verses from a dusty old Bible that was still sitting on the pulpit and then the pitcher told a story his mother often told him about the time God saved her from a burning house. The three outfielders sang a familiar hymn, and then closed with a silent prayer.

After the service was over the visitor thanked the team and said that he really enjoyed the informal atmosphere and--to their dismay--said he would be back next week. The members of the team were unsure of what to do. The next week the visitor did indeed return—and with a friend.

Once again the second baseman led off with a scripture reading and several of the group told stories that they remembered from their childhood in the church. One of the women dusted off the old piano and began to play some of the hymns, after which everyone went out to the field for a softball game.

When word spread around town that the service at the new church never lasted over 30 minutes and folks could come dressed as casual as they pleased, several other unchurched families came out to take a look. Soon others were sharing their stories and offering their musical talents to enhance the worship. The team was stunned--they called an emergency meeting to decide what to do, but the night before they were to meet the catcher's house burned to the ground.

Since the house was destroyed and he had no where to live, everybody felt it was only right that the catcher and his family should move in to the church building until his house could be rebuilt. Maybe, they thought, with someone living there no one would want to come to worship. But word spread, and lots of people brought food and furniture to help the family out. Indeed,

so much came in that when the family left they had to give away two truck loads of the stuff to whoever would take it.

Soon word got around town that the new church was giving food and furniture to the poor. The mayor wrote a complimentary article in the local paper about the church really doing God's work, and some of the socially minded members of the community came out to see what the church was like. This new faction organized the food pantry and fixed up the living quarters for emergency housing for the homeless.

One Sunday when the kids were noisy during sharing time a suggestion was made that a Sunday School be started for them. The next week there were 16 children there. Well, things continued to move along quite rapidly at the little church until soon it was not big enough for everything that was going on. A suggestion was made and approved that the church purchase a building another church was closing and move downtown. The motion was passed over the loud objections of the ball team who complained that they would have no place to play if the church moved. But the majority ruled, saying that God's work could not be hampered by a mere softball team.

It was at this point the second baseman stood up and confessed what had always been the team's dirty little secret, that there never was supposed to be a church, that the team had only wanted to have a place to play ball, and that God had worked through them anyway, he had seen it and he felt the church should move to a new location. At this confession the congregation decided not only to move downtown, but to keep the ball field, for it was important, they felt, to remember their heritage, to be reminded of how God had worked.

(Story by Woody Eddins)

Life with God is an adventure! Those softball guys learned this, Abraham's servant learned this, and so can we!

The Good News is this: God has perfect vision when it comes to looking into the human heart and seeing what is going on inside of us. God sees our sins, God understands our shame, God knows our deepest hurts, our worst failures, and our best strengths, even the things we won't admit to ourselves. In spite of the ugly stuff that hides within each of us, God claims us as his children and declares his love for us. No matter what you have done or have neglected to do, no matter whether you know that the Lord is with you or feel that somehow you missed out because you aren't so sure about God at all, God is right here, breathing life and hope your way and asking you to dare to say, "Okay, God, I need you. Please help me to know you, please help me to trust you." By doing this, we unlock the doors to our hearts and claim our Lord as the One who loves us, who sees us all the way through, and who still says to us, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy-burdened, and I will give you rest."

May each of us accept this grace-filled offer. Amen.