



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Matthew J. Moretz, *Associate Rector*

## Beasts of Burden

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, October 1, 2017  
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Matthew 11:25-30*

*“Whether in our homeland or in a strange land, may we dig into the patch of ground we stand upon. May we lean in and put our back into Jesus’ way of mercy and compassion.”*

Please pray with me in the words of Jesus: “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.”

I have to commend Jesus here. I think that if I had been through all that Jesus had been through in his ministry, I wouldn’t be able to pray the prayer we just prayed together. I think I would be frustrated, more than anything else. Is this something to say thank you for? What good is his teaching if the “infants” can understand, but the smart people can’t? If this happened to me, I might wonder if I was making any sense at all. And I probably wouldn’t be saying thank you.

Just before this prayer, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus gives us a taste of some of his frustration as he works throughout Galilee and beyond. He laments publicly, because among his own people, among certain areas of the Jewish faithful, his message was falling flat. Not only that, in settlements like Chorazin, and Bethsaida, in places rooted in devotion to God, it wasn’t working. Jesus and his disciples were rejected there, when you would think that these would be the most receptive, the most primed to receive this abundant, expansive access to God that Jesus was offering them. One of the hard-hearted places, Bethsaida, was actually the fishing village where Peter, Philip, and Andrew had grown up. Bethsaida was where Jesus healed the blind and fed the five thousand. But, according to Jesus, even that didn’t help. They were unimpressed. They didn’t really change. How does he put it, in his lament? “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!”

And let’s not forget to put Nazareth, Jesus’ home village, in his list of disappointments, too. Woe to you Nazareth! He preached in his synagogue about how God blesses all kinds people, not just the Chosen People. He quoted scripture, too. It was too much for them; they nearly threw Jesus off a cliff. And he had to run away, never to return.

They knew Jesus better than anyone. They raised him. But their knowledge and familiarity contained him and constrained them from seeing him. And rather than seeing who was there, they aimed to destroy one of their own flesh and blood, and live in willful blindness.

In Mark, it says that Jesus “marvelled at their unbelief,” as if he was surprised. I think this rejection in Nazareth by the people closest to him, and most like him, would have weighed heavy on his heart.

If, as Jesus proclaimed, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house,” where are they with honor? Well, Jesus fled his hometown, took his ministry on the road. And as he travelled with his growing band, he also marveled that those beyond his native land were

giving him honor. He mentions Tyre and Sidon, those cosmopolitan and almost completely pagan port cities. Who would have guessed? Jesus' ministry worked very well there, and in places like them. His ministry of healing and forgiveness was eagerly received by people who were living in all kinds of outlying and alien communities. Gentiles, Samaritans, notorious sinners, and sometimes Romans. These were the ones that the "wise and intelligent" of the faith would have reckoned as "infants" in the faith, or much worse.

This reminds me of the experience of so many transplanted New Yorkers who have been rejected or iced out from their hometowns because they didn't fit in. For some of you expats, the places that knew you best didn't care for you much, took offense at your very being; and it might have been your ruin if you stayed much longer. Yet in this grand, motley city of New York, some of you have found a place with people that see who you truly are and can be your friend and accept your gifts more readily than your hometown people ever could. Ironically, it is in a strange land that you are revealed and in your native land that you are hidden. It's like that with a lot of us. It was like that with Jesus, and with Jesus we both lament the exile and yet find a way to say thank you for the good things we have found in this new home.

We are acutely aware when people don't get us. But if the truth of people and God can be so hidden from the know-it-alls and the experts, how do we seek God without falling into that trap? We want to learn. How, in our learning, can we avoid the age-old trap of thinking we know, of being so sure, but actually being tragically mistaken?

I think one defense against this folly is found in the next saying that Jesus offers. The one that talks about a yoke. Not the yolk of an egg, but the less familiar yoke that is part-harness, part-frame for a beast of burden. Really, what the yoke allows the oxen or the donkey to do is to take the energy of walking and transfer it into useful purposes: to carry a heavy load to a building site or to pull a plow in order to seed a field. The yoke allows the animal to contribute to a project larger than itself and follow the direction of a master that is keeper of the animal and the overseer of that larger project. And that yoke can be connected to other animals, and they can then combine their energy to make even more of a contribution to the project at hand. The yoke is a way to give your will and your work over to someone else. And in this image that Jesus conjures for us, if you can see yourself as a yoked animal, well, you aren't wise, or intelligent, or a know-it-all. This isn't a self-sufficient creature.

In order to be a good yoked animal, you are meant to be a good listener. A good follower of the voice of your master. The yoke stands for a kind of obedience that leads to transcendence. The yoke tethers us to a larger life beyond our limited scope, that comes in listening to another voice, following a path that you didn't set, and then digging into the ground under your feet and pulling that weight.

But what kind of yoke do you have? What kind of weight are you pulling? Jesus recognizes that we all, by virtue of living a life, have a yoke. We all carry a weight and a burden for somebody and for somebody's plan.

We, in our time on this earth, can pull all kinds of things with our yoke. We can pull a freight cart with all kinds of stuff loaded up. We can pull a shopping cart to sell someone's wares. We can even pull an artillery cannon in someone's battle. Or we beasts of burden can pull other things, like a cart full of medicine during a plague, a cart full of supplies for those in disaster, or a cart full of refugees to safety. When Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you," he wants to switch the yoke you already have for a much better one. When he says, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light," he means to say that in comparison, his yoke is easier, and his burden is lighter than all the others.

One of the most vital choices of our lives is to choose how we wish to be yoked. For some this comes in making promises and vows. For others, it comes in just changing your mind one day, one pivotal day. But if we take on the yoke of Jesus, a power shift will take place.

For starters, we will leave aside the burden of counting up all the ways we have been wronged and carrying

these leaden grudges, and replace those burdens with a different burden, a lighter burden of Mercy, but a burden all the same. It's the burden of forgiving all those who have wronged us, and with Jesus' yoke we'd find ourselves pulling the grudges out of our hearts much like a team of oxen would pull out a gnarled stump from a field.

With most other yokes, we could only pull people in our cart who are like us, people in our nation, tribe, or party, people who are friendly and stand-up folks. With the yoke of Jesus, we can carry all sorts, of every tribe and party, friends and enemies, saints and sinners. We join a larger life.

With other yokes, we carry the weight of fear, judgment, and disgust. With Jesus' yoke, we would walk, step-by-holy-step, in being trained to not be afraid anymore, to not judge one another anymore, and to undo all the tragic, historical aversions that we've been taught.

With other yokes, we learn how to be wise, and intelligent, better than others to save our skin, with blinders on; with Jesus' yoke we learn how to walk as a child of the Light, better than no one, yet with something to give for all, no blinders.

If we take on Jesus' yoke, if we follow Jesus' way and voice, we will find a lot of work to do, maybe more than we've ever done. But with Jesus' yoke, it will be holy work. Work that will make you feel like a beginner, like a child. But it will be work that will bear so much more fruit than before.

So may we strive to seek the better work that is in store for us, with Jesus' spirit over our shoulders and in our hearts. Whether in our homeland or in a strange land, may we dig into the patch of ground we stand upon. May we lean in and put our back into Jesus' way of mercy and compassion. And may we ever remember Jesus words: "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."

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For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission  
write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org)  
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022