

*The Yoke Is On You*

July 9, 2017

Rev. Alan Claassen

**Food for Thought**

*A Summer Day*

Mary Oliver

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean –  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down –  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

**Scripture:** Matthew 11:28-30

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

I have a story to share with you this morning – the story of the Clay Buddha. In 1957, a group of Tibetan monks was informed that a highway was being built, and the highway would have to go through the location where the shrine that they worshipped was currently located. The shrine, a huge clay Buddha, would have to be moved. Arrangements were made, and the day of shrine-moving arrived. The shrine, located under a roof to keep it safe from the elements, was prepared for its journey.

A crane began lifting the clay Buddha. The shrine, as it rose off of its block resting place, began to crack. It was far heavier than the engineers had estimated. The monk supervising the movement of the Buddha frantically called to the crane operator, telling him to set the Buddha down. Quickly, the alert crane operator carefully set the Buddha on the ground. As the monks and the engineers examined the Buddha, they found several large cracks. A larger crane would be needed. That crane would not be brought in until the next day, so the Buddha would have to stay one more night in its current location. To make matters worse, there was a storm building, and the next day would be a stormy one. The monks covered the Buddha with waterproof tarps stretched over bamboo poles to keep it dry overnight. All seemed to be well.

During the night, the monk supervising the project awoke and decided to check on the Buddha. With a flashlight, the monk carefully circled the Buddha, and as he walked around the huge clay figure, shining his light on the cracks, something caught his eye. As he peered into one of the cracks, he did not understand what he saw; he needed to see more. The monk went back to his quarters, found a chisel and a hammer, and returned to the Buddha. He began carefully chipping away at the clay around the crack. As the crack widened, he could not believe his eyes. He ran to wake the other monks and instructed each to bring a hammer and chisel. By lantern light the monks carefully chipped all the clay from the Buddha. After hours of chiseling, the monks stepped back and stared in awe at the sight before them. There in front of them stood a solid gold Buddha.

When the moving crew arrived in the morning to complete the job of moving the Buddha to its new location, there was much confusion and excitement. Where had the clay Buddha gone? Where had this beautiful Golden Buddha come from? Historians were called, and research was begun to discover the origin of the Golden Buddha. After much research, the pieces of the story were put together.

The Golden Buddha had been the cherished responsibility of a group of monks several centuries earlier. These monks received word that the Burmese army was headed their way. Concerned that the invading army would loot the shrine for its Golden Buddha, the monks covered their Buddha with eight to twelve inches of clay. When they were finished, the Golden Buddha appeared to be a Buddha of clay, and the monks trusted that the invading army would have no interest in it. They were correct; the invading army had no interest in the Buddha. They did, however, take away all the monks as prisoners, and the story of the clay-covered Buddha was lost in history until 1957.

There is a Golden Buddha inside each of us, hidden away and covered with layers and layers of clay. We start out life as a Golden Buddha. Then our true self gets put on a shelf and we get involved in the survival game, or we build up layers of protection, and memories of hurt or disappointment. We begin to lose our true drive, and we lose sight of the gifts each one of us has to offer.

The darkness of the hardened mud protected the Golden Buddha from invaders, but it also hid it from devoted worshippers for centuries. How often do our forms of protection actually hide the light that is within us? And how often do our negative judgments of ourselves and of others keep us from seeing the little light that shines in each of us?

Jesus came to the people of his time, people who had been suffering from oppression for so long that their true nature had been buried, forgotten and hidden. The inner gold of Jesus was revealed to him when he was baptized in the Jordan River and he heard the voice from God saying to him “You are my beloved.” When Jesus heard these words as he came up out of the water of the Jordan, he didn’t hear them as words of entitlement. Jesus heard them as a message he was to share with the people. He heard those words as an assignment. Jesus also remembered the words of the prophets that, like the Golden Buddha, had been buried with pounds of mud and forgetfulness over the centuries. He remembered the words of Isaiah:

If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, if you offer food to the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness, and your gloom will be like noonday. (Isaiah 58:9b-10)

No judgment; instead offer food for the hungry and care for the needy, and your light will shine. And in fulfilling both the words of the prophets and the message of God at his baptism, Jesus told the people:

You are beloved by God; you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Now let’s remove this mud, let’s remove these patterns of protection and let your light shine.

There is a story of a man, a recovering alcoholic, who was looking for a church to help him with his recovery. He went from church to church, and found the same self-righteousness – people full of themselves and how good they were. They claimed to have no pain, no struggles, no heartbreaks. The man had just about given up finding a church that could help him in his recovery, when one Sunday morning he found himself walking by a church where the service was already in progress. He decided to go in, and sat in the back pew just as the scripture for the day was being read. He heard these words written by the Apostle Paul: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” When the man heard these words he thought to himself, “At last, I have found a church for me. These are my kind of people.” And so he kept on listening as the gospel was read. The person reading the scripture quoted the words of Jesus:

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

Lay down your burdens . . . and come to one who will help you carry it, share the load with you, be a bridge over troubled water, a companion in the struggle for justice (or the creation of a worship service!). You can choose who you are yoked with, who you dance with, who you love, and with whom you wish to share your one precious life. All you need is love: love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self. United in Christ, let us work for a just world for all.

I would like to close with the words of Mary Oliver from her poem “A Summer Day.” I love how the poem emphasizes the importance of prayer as attention to the gifts of nature, and how it emphasizes the importance of choice.

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I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

It's your choice. The yoke is on you. And the yoke connects you with the wisdom and compassion of Jesus, a beloved child of God.

Amen.