

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday July 5th, 2026 – (Year A. Pentecost +6)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Boronia Road Uniting Church

Bible passages: Genesis 24:42-49, 58-67 and Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 (NRSVUE)

“Which stick will I lean on?”

PREAMBLE (early introduction to theme)

My theme title today is *“Which stick will I lean on?”*. I think it’s fair to say that we all lean on something or someone to get us through life. But what if we lean on the wrong things or wrong people? As Christians we are trying, maybe not always successfully, to lean on our Lord in the good times and bad. How well have you been doing that? Our story today from Genesis 24 is about Abraham, in his final years, leaning once again on the Lord, as he has done many times, and this time it was to seek God’s guidance and blessing in finding a wife for his son Isaac. Then in our gospel reading from Matthew 11, Jesus himself asks people in the crowd of listeners what or whom they are leaning on. What kind of wisdom are they leaning on? Who do they lean on for support when navigating the challenges of life? With that question comes the invitation to “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me...” (Mt 11:28-29). What are these two stories saying to us today?

MESSAGE

When you lean on a walking stick, to help you walk with an injured leg, in which hand do you hold the walking stick? My instinctive response is to hold the stick on the same side as the bad leg. But as it turns out, according to the experts, you should hold the stick on the *opposite* side to the bad leg. [Demonstrate this with a walking stick]

This is a good analogy of the Christian life! The Christian ‘walk’ is one where we lean on our Lord to help us through life, right? Yet, instinctively, as humans, we are tempted, constantly, to lean on other things in life (fill in the blanks!). But in calling us to lean on him, Christ is inviting us to lean in quite the opposite way to the way our human nature wants to lean.

Our bible passage today from Matthew 11 is about leaning on Jesus. In this well known and much-loved passage, Jesus uses the ‘yoke’ as an illustration of how to lean on him – a yoke being that wooden device that links two oxen together so the load can be shared. The yoke Jesus provides is vital in helping us walk with him, sharing our load with him, being guided by him, being supported by him.

In addressing the crowd that day, Jesus is inviting them to consider what or whom they lean on in life. The story asks the same thing of us. What or whom do we lean on in life? Well, the answer is ‘Jesus’ of course! (Well the answer should always be ‘Jesus’ if we are Christians!) Remember, whenever a preacher asks you any question, the answer is always ‘Jesus’! And again, today, that answer is correct. But I feel this passage is calling us to dive a bit deeper than that in our thinking and reflection!

Just before inviting people to take up his yoke, Jesus talks about a kind of *wisdom* that only comes from leaning on him. This is a wisdom, as it says in verse 25, that is hidden from intelligent people yet revealed to his humble followers (that’s us – not that we’re unintelligent!). This wisdom, as we so often read in scripture, is the *opposite* kind to worldly wisdom. This wisdom of Jesus, *from* Jesus and *in* Jesus is so often rejected by the world.

The context of this passage is the time when Jesus was comparing himself to John the Baptist. John's expression of faith had been to withdraw from all the trappings of life (eating, drinking, partying, etc). Jesus' expression of faith, by contrast was to engage in those things. Two expressions of true wisdom. Neither right nor wrong per se. But the powerful people – those who leant on a different kind of wisdom, rejected *both* John and Jesus. It didn't matter how true faith was expressed, you couldn't win with these people, and that's what Jesus laments in this story. They wouldn't play the 'John' game or the 'Jesus' game. John had come to *prepare* the way (Mt 11:10). Jesus came to *live out* that way. But most people would go a completely different way and lean on a different kind of wisdom to that of Jesus.

The whole bible is full of God's 'alternative' wisdom. It's all through the New and Old Testaments. In today's (long) Genesis reading we again see an example of leaning on God's wisdom.

This is actually a love story with a happy ending! Isaac and Rebekah fall in love and get married. We may not like the idea of it being an arranged marriage, or the fact that women were treated as property in those patriarchal times. But there is still genuine love here.

But it's not just a love story. It's also a *faith* story, evident in all the events leading up to that happy ending. Abraham wants a wife for his son Isaac. In faith he trusts in God to find the right girl. He sends his chief servant on a long journey back to Abraham's homeland to find a wife from among his own clan. Now it's the faith of this un-named servant that really stands out. When you read all of Genesis 24, this guy steals the show with his faithful obedience, prayers and thankfulness to God. He's amazing. His faith really shines.

And the servant's faithfulness is rewarded. He finds Rebekah. And, long story short, Rebekah happily agrees to leave everything and go with this servant back to Abraham and Isaac in the Land of Canaan.

As the story goes, upon her first sighting of Isaac out the field it says in our reading that Rebekah "slipped quickly from the camel" (v64). In Hebrew it literally says she 'fell off' the camel when she saw Isaac! One could say she literally *fell* for him! And soon after it says that Isaac took her to be his wife "and he loved her". (v67) And so the whole family is blessed. And it's interesting that this blessing comes in the shadow of grief, since their beloved Sarah (Abraham's wife, Isaac's mother) had only recently died. We are told that the blessing of love was a "comfort" to Isaac (v67). So often that's how it is in God's story. Blessing and comfort comes in the shadow of our grief.

This whole story is quite saturated with the blessing of faithfulness – the blessing of cooperating with God – of participating in his plans – of *leaning* on him. It's a story about God's leading, and human participation in that leading, which is essentially the same message in our gospel reading, as it so happens!

So, if we are to 'dig deeper' (beneath the simple "Jesus is the answer" response) into what it means to really lean on Jesus, what might we discover? A few things jumped out for me as I reflected on this Matthew 11 text.

This 'yoke' Jesus offers to us is not only a yoke of support, but a yoke of learning and guidance. Jesus says in verse 29 to "Take my yoke and learn from me". This yoke is one that opens our hearts, minds and understanding to that *hidden* wisdom that we can only find in Jesus. Furthermore, this yoke is about *relationship* with Jesus. We learn from him through relationship far more than learning from any book or any other teaching.

Jesus also says this yoke is 'easy and light' (v 30). At first this might be hard to comprehend, especially when we also hear Jesus say, "Take up your cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24), which conveys the idea of the cost and burden of following him. We also note that a yoke functioned as a kind of *discipline* for the oxen to keep them on the straight and narrow.

How, then is this burden 'easy and light'. I feel it helps to place Jesus' words in the context of the way Jewish religious society of the time placed an oppressive burden on those people, forcing them to work very hard to be 'good enough' to please God, given all their rules and sacrifices. But Jesus says we don't have to keep trying hard to be good enough. We are already good enough by God's grace. And anything we do for him is done with his strength in us anyway. We don't have to rely on our own strength. That's what makes his burden easy and light.

Another thing about this 'yoke' is that it gives us 'rest'. Other translations of verse 28, use the word 'refreshing' of our souls, which is maybe a better word. It is hard to fully capture the depth and richness of what this 'refreshing' is like. Maybe the best word to use is the Hebrew 'Shalom' for which there is no adequate English translation. 'Shalom' is a mixture of peace; wholeness; completeness; well-being; harmony; flourishing; safety; strength and we could go on. In being yoked to Jesus we can know the richness of this shalom.

Finally, the idea of being yoked, even though carrying the notion of 'rest' is not about being idle and doing nothing. After all, a yoke was used to help the oxen plough the field. It's about work. It's about action. And there is one short sentence Jesus uses about this in verse 19: "Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." God's wisdom is about deeds, action, doing and serving. The walking stick is not just for leaning on! It's for helping you move and walk! I love Eugene Peterson's translation of Jesus' words in this passage: "*Walk with me and work with me*" (verse 29 in 'The Message'). To live like our Lord, we must act like him, which of course means putting our faith into action in all the places where action is needed. Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

In our two stories today from Genesis and Matthew, one thing is clear. We are being invited to participate with God and lean on him, and in so doing discover a wisdom (and blessing) that we cannot find anywhere else.

But it's not always that simple. Sometimes it is incredibly difficult to decide which stick to lean on. And even when we work that out, it takes a lot of courage to lean on the stick that we know is best for us. Even the Apostle Paul struggled with this. In one of our other lectionary readings this week, Paul admits he doesn't always get this choice right, stating, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do...I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" (Romans 7:15-18). In his desperation he cries out, "Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (v24-25).

As we too, figure out each day what or who to lean on, let us daily hear those words of Jesus, saying, "*Come to me*". "Come to me ...Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me"