

The easy yoke: *Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30*

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [June 16, 1999](#) issue

I'm not sure how long ago it was, that summer afternoon at our friends' house when a neighbor drove her car dramatically into the yard and got out to say, catching her breath with every few words, that her two little boys were missing and that she feared they had wandered into the woods.

This sounds like the start of a suspenseful anecdote, but in fact, there is little to match the excitement of the start. My friend and I ran up the lane to the neighbor's house and then fanned out among the trees. We probably searched for no more than half an hour. Meanwhile the two boys and their dog meandered back home. Mom thanked us profusely; we were glad to be of help. Back to the barbecue.

What makes this incident so memorable for me is the sensation of supernatural *lightness* that I felt running through the woods. The terrain was rough, the temperature hot enough to discourage running, and I was not in especially good shape. Still, I can remember bounding deeper and deeper into the woods with an overwhelming rush of exuberance.

I don't think the sensation can be explained entirely as the result of adrenaline. A part of it had to do with an assurance, rare enough in my life, that nothing I had to do at that moment was more important than helping that mother find her children.

So often I meet one obligation only to feel reproached by another. I'm working those few extra hours at my desk and I think that I should really devote more time to people. But when I'm at my friend's house I cannot suppress the feeling that I ought to be home at my desk. My life is not always like this, but it's like this often enough for me to notice the occasions when the nagging voice abates. And it abated completely that afternoon with the first sight of that distraught mother's face.

I imagine that the rush I felt is what some people find so thrilling about volunteer ambulance or fire-fighting work. I also imagine it's something of what Jesus meant when he said that his yoke was easy and his burden light. Wholly committed to the kingdom of God, "meek and lowly of heart" in the sense that everything was subsumed for him in that reality, he could never know a moment in which he "should

be" anywhere or anyone other than where and who he was. Compared to the lives of quiet desperation he saw all around him, his yoke was easy and his burden light.

And yet it's nearly impossible to read this verse from Matthew without anticipating the punchline of a cruel joke. Who can picture Jesus in his "easy yoke" without instantly confronting the image of him bowed beneath his heavy cross, a "yoke" so difficult that he requires assistance to carry it all the way to Golgotha? Where is the lightness in that?

Only one answer seems to make sense: the lightness is in his love.

A life that attempts to "balance" itself with no better object than to "be balanced"—that is, to be blameless and accomplished—is a juggling act in which sooner or later one of the balls has to drop. A life in which work, prayer and relationships are but different expressions of love is much "lowlier" in its aims. It is an act not of juggling balls on a stage, but of carrying eggs from a barn. Make no mistake: it is sometimes the act of carrying a cross. But it is "light" in the sense that its purpose and priorities are always clear.

Jesus does not say, "Break all yokes," but rather "Take my yoke upon you." In this, he places himself in opposition to much of what passes for wisdom, both sacred and secular. We might expect him to say, "Get rid of your baggage." Of course, he does say that in other places, if you count possessions and grudges as baggage. But there can come a point in our harried and self-absorbed lives at which "getting rid of the baggage" comes down to getting rid of love itself. We mistake the baggage for our own hearts. We renounce pity, fidelity and sacrifice as more than we have time for. We let go of our "baggage" like a balloonist who attempts to gain altitude by letting go of the balloon.

Of course, if there is no God, if God is not love, if we are not created by and for love, then we probably ought to let go of everything we can. Detachment is the key. But it's hard to reconcile that approach with the gospel. Whatever else you want to say about Christ on the cross, he is definitely attached.

One can imagine a Christian version of Buddha's Four Noble Truths that goes something like this: 1) All existence involves suffering. 2) Suffering is caused by attachment. (So far no change.) 3) The only authentic form of attachment is love. 4) To achieve authentic attachment, "Take up your cross and follow me."

Of course, it is impertinent to suggest that Christ would sanction my little formula or that Buddha wouldn't. And it is shortsighted to focus so intently on the hard wood of the cross that we forget the "easy yoke" that Jesus offers us.

To follow Jesus is to be swift-footed in pursuit of the lost. It is to run with your heart pounding and your feet stumbling but your head clear in the sense that there's nothing more important on your agenda.

As I write this, the nation is pondering how two boys massacred 12 of their classmates and a teacher at a high school in Colorado. Multitudes of our children are lost in the woods. What are you doing right now that is more important than finding them?