

*Loving God, help us to hear your word in music, Scripture, and spoken word. Guide us to respond in ways that bring glory to you and peace to the world. Amen.*

Most of you know by now that canoeing is one of my deepest loves.

If you don't know this yet, I encourage you to read [this month's Dialogue cover article](#).

When I was in high school, I went to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness for the first time, with my church youth group. I went again the next summer, and then two years later, when I was in college, I coordinated the trip for the high school students from my home church and served as the chaperone.

Finally, the following summer, I was old enough to serve as a canoe guide at a church camp, and could spend my entire summer in the Boundary Waters.

There was only one thing I was worried about before starting my summer as a canoe guide.

I couldn't portage a canoe.

Portaging is when you place the canoe on your shoulders and carry it down a path to get around rapids in a river, or from one lake to another.

I had tried on all my previous Boundary Waters trips to carry a canoe, but I had never been able to do so successfully. It seemed like my 20-year-old shoulders just weren't broad enough, or my non-athletic frame just wasn't strong enough, or something. I couldn't figure out how to get a 90-pound aluminum canoe from one body of water to another.

For those who have never done this, allow me to describe.

The easiest and most efficient way to carry a canoe is to place the canoe on one person's shoulders, at the center thwart, or the yoke, and for them to carry it on their own. This is called portaging.

Some canoes have a yoke built in, with curved places to put your neck and indentations for your shoulders. Other canoes, like the ones we used at camp, need to have yoke pads added so that you can place them on your shoulders and carry the canoe that way.

A well-balanced canoe actually feels comfortable, and is pretty easy to carry on your own. But a canoe that is heavier in the front or the back is going to be difficult to balance and heavy to carry.

More importantly, a yoke that is made to fit your body will make it easy to carry a load, no matter how heavy. One that doesn't fit you well will make the load seem unwieldy, even if it's relatively light.

This was my problem when I started out as a canoe guide. All of the yoke pads were set too far apart from one another. I ended up carrying the weight of the canoe on my upper arms, not on my shoulders, and since there was nothing under my arms to support the weight, the boat simply felt too heavy.

As it turns out, it *wasn't* actually that my shoulders weren't broad enough – it was that the yoke pads were set too far apart from one another. It wasn't that I couldn't carry a canoe – I just needed to have the proper tools in order to do it without hurting myself or dropping the boat.

The purpose of a yoke is to make a load feel lighter, to make it easier to bear.

On the cover of your bulletin is a woman carrying water buckets on a yoke over her neck. The yoke is there so that she can carry more weight without hurting herself. This is the purpose of any kind of yoke – to carry a great deal of weight without hurting yourself. In the case of a yoke that goes across two sets of shoulders – for example, a yoke that's used by two oxen – a yoke is there to allow for more weight to be carried than either could do on their own. According to one source I found this week, two plow horses can carry not double the weight when yoked together, but four times the weight – their capacity isn't added, but multiplied!

It took me until the very last portage of my first trip with campers before I could carry a canoe further than about 20 feet. But it felt like such an accomplishment when I did it!

By the end of my first summer as a canoe guide, as long as I picked a boat that was well-balanced and had a yoke to fit my shoulders, I could carry that 90-pound aluminum canoe two miles, all by myself.

My yoke was easy, and my burden was light.

I think this is what Jesus means in today's Gospel lesson.

When you who are weary and heavy laden bring your burdens to Jesus, it's not that he literally lightens the load.

He doesn't just take 20 pounds off of what you're carrying until you arrive at your destination.

Rather, Jesus adjusts the yoke and balances the load, so that you can carry more than you ever thought you could, and it seems easier than ever before.

If you are overwhelmed by health crises and tense family relationships, and trying to pay all your bills in the midst of it all – Jesus doesn't actually come along and say, ok, I've got your utilities bill this month. He doesn't take something away so that we never have to deal with it. He helps us to carry the weight of all that stress, so that our load doesn't feel so impossibly heavy.

Jesus can teach us how to prioritize so that we have time for the things that matter and don't waste our energy on the things that don't.

You're dealing with a health crisis and tense family relationships? Well, right now you need to focus on getting healthy. Can everyone rally around that issue for now, and work out their other disagreements later?

Maybe that's not your particular issue, or your particular solution.

But whatever major events are causing you stress in life – when you bring those burdens to Jesus, he can adjust the yoke for you and make things more balanced so that the burden doesn't seem unbearable.

He can help you keep carrying those things that need to be carried, and leave behind those things that you don't need any more. He can help you figure out which stressors are worth the worry, and which are better forgotten.

Jesus can take some of the intangibles off our shoulders.

Some people we know carry all kinds of burdens and do so with energy and pep to spare! Others are overwhelmed by a life change that we might see as inconsequential, but they just can't get beyond it.

Carrying the wrong burden can be backbreaking.

If you're married to the wrong person, working in the wrong field, living in the wrong place, following the wrong examples, or trying to fulfill the wrong expectations – you're going to have a hard time. Your yoke will be heavy!

But if you give your burdens to Jesus, the load can be lifted.

If you follow the guidance of the divine voice, then your burden will be lightened and you'll be able to carry whatever weight is laid across your shoulders.

All of us experience troubles in life. At some point we'll encounter a burden that we think is too heavy to bear. In those moments, the best thing we can do is to share the burden with another. Find someone else to be yoked to – again, as pairs of oxen are yoked together – or more to the point, share your burden with Jesus, who claims that his yoke is easy and his burden is light.

He will bring you rest for your soul.

Which is to say, he will help you discern whether you are carrying the right burden or not.

Jesus knows all about carrying heavy burdens. He carried his own execution tool to the place where he was put to death. He felt the emotional weight of what God was expecting him to do.

Jesus, by his very existence, had a tremendous impact on the lives of his family members. If they hadn't been related to the Messiah, surely, their lives would have been easier! Because of Jesus, his parents had to become refugees in a foreign country when he was still an infant.

From the moment that he entered this world, Jesus carried burdens that were heavy, emotionally, spiritually, physically, and relationally.

Talk about a heavy burden? Jesus has carried it. Jesus knows the struggles that each one of us is going through. He understands your emotions and reactions. He can relate.

He's been human. He knows what it's like to be worried, anxious, depressed, betrayed, poor, persecuted, angry, afraid, or anything else you've experienced.

As some of you know, one of my prayers with people who are ill, hospitalized, or dying, is a thanksgiving that God knows what it's like to be human. Through Jesus, God can feel our hurts and our pain, our grief, and our uncertainty. What a blessing to have a God who can relate to these most raw moments of our lives!

Jesus learned how to carry all these things in such a way that they did not crush him. So take your burdens to him, and let him lighten your load!

One of my friends told me a story about redwood trees this week. You know, those tremendously huge and ancient trees, that mostly live out in California, and some of which have been around since about the time of Jesus.

If you haven't visited the redwoods, I highly recommend it. Walking through those forests is amazing and holy in the same way that walking through a cathedral is.

The story I heard from my friend is one I hope is true. He told me that these trees can only grow as tall as they do because they are part of a redwood *forest*.

A single redwood wouldn't last nearly as long. They have to grow in forests, because the only thing that keeps them upright is the fact that their roots intertwine with one another, so each tree actually helps to hold up the neighboring trees.

This is the role of Jesus, and the whole Christian community. Hold up your neighbor, even in difficult times, because without them, you'll never survive.

Bring your burdens, not only to Jesus, but to the other followers of Jesus with whom you are in community. Share your troubles with the folks on the prayer chain. If you need financial help, don't be afraid to ask your church for support. When you are ill or homebound, welcome visitors who wish to spend time with you.

And if your burden is comparatively light right now – do some of those things that might help to lighten the burden of another person!

Here's another thing that I've learned about carrying canoes over the years. They're heavy. And a few years ago, I started having some serious back problems. But I can still carry a 90-pound aluminum canoe.

If I get someone to help me lift that weight up on to my shoulders, and if the yoke fits right, and if the canoe is balanced well front-to-back, then I can carry an aluminum canoe – not quite as far as I could before my back problems started, but far enough to get the job done.

Because it's not about the weight of the load. Jesus carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, and he didn't get overwhelmed.

It's about the yoke that helps you carry that burden, and it's about who is with you to help carry it.

Jesus says, come to me, you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

This is the good news for us today, and every day.

Cast your burdens unto Jesus, for he cares for you.

Amen.