I met Gene and John and their families when I began serving at their congregation in Roanoke. Both men had been retired for several years and were enjoying this new chapter in their lives: fixing things around the house, traveling with their wives and spending time with their grandchildren. Gene and John both had a real zest for life. It is because of them that I kept a fishing rod in the back of my car just in case they came by the office and lured me away to go climb down a bank and fish on the river. That happened regularly. What also happened regularly were the clever practical jokes of which I was the recipient and almost never saw coming.

Gene and John liked to meet each morning for breakfast. It was an echo of what they had done each day when they worked for the railroad, a quiet time to plan their days over a cup of coffee. Something happened to the place the men were meeting so they decided to switch to a Hardee's that just happened to be located near where I lived. Some mornings I would stop by to catch up with the men before I started my day. One morning, I stopped and Gene and John weren't there. When I next saw them, I asked what had happened. “Oh, we can't go there anymore,” Gene said. Knowing their propensity for jokes, I asked if they had done something to get kicked out. “No,” Gene answered. “There is this group of old men who are there every morning. We call them the 'Ain't It Awful Club'. All they do is complain – about everything. The weather, the news, local crime, politics, you name it, those guys moan about it all. They are never happy. We got tired of hearing “Ain't It Awful” first thing every morning, so we're going somewhere else.”

I think often about Gene and John and their aversion to the “Ain't It Awful Club.” I admired them for not joining into the chorus of negativity around them every day. I've also thought about my very own “Ain't It Awful” club, a place where I retreat when I get tired and frustrated. Right now, my club has one member but Billy joins me sometimes and I know it wouldn't be hard to find others to meet with us. I read the news every day and my first thought is “Ain't It Awful.” And it is, a lot of it. Wars and rumors of wars. Countries provoking other countries with the threat of unleashing nuclear weapons. Countries simply moving in and taking over smaller, weaker ones. Power used for personal gain and not to bring people together. Lack of equality for women and the most vulnerable members of society: in other countries, to be sure, but here in our country as well. I talk to people who are struggling or carrying heavy burdens and I leave thinking, “Ain't It Awful.” And it is. I know people who have to force themselves to get out of bed every morning, so overwhelmed are they by family situations or poor health. I go to the doctor myself and hear over and over from younger doctors that my body is reacting normally to the aging process, that these things that bother me are inevitable and are not going to go away. “When did this happen?” I wonder. “Ain't It Awful,” I think and sometimes it is, at least in the little bubble of a life in which I often live.

“Ain't It Awful.” Many of us know all the lyrics to that song; in fact we have lived those words, every one of them. Life in this world can be difficult, unfair, exhausting and just plain awful. Sometimes things happen to us and we have little control over them. We get sick. We lose a job. Someone we love dies. The news scares us. And sometimes the awfulness is of our own doing. We make poor decisions and have to live with the consequences. We welcome people into our lives who aren't good for us. We conjure up complications that don't have to exist. We take on too much or focus too much energy on the thing that drains us instead of what will bring us life. Into this mess steps Jesus, the one who has always been there but whom we do not always see. “Ain't It Awful?” we tell him and he says “yes.” But, he also says, “It does not need to be this way.” For Jesus came to lighten our load, to make life easier for us. He tells us, “Come to me, all you who are weary and 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.”

For many of us, the only experience we have of yokes is the differently spelled thing that we see in the middle of our eggs in the morning. But if you Google the word “yoke,” you'll find something interesting. There are two kinds of yokes for farm animals, or at least there used to be around here before tractors came along. A single yoke was placed on an animal so that it could pull a plow behind it. Google results show a few of those single yokes. But they also show many more images of double yokes. Double yokes harness a pair of animals so they can drag a load together as efficiently as possible. When Jesus sees us plowing through life as if we were wearing a single yoke, he appears beside us, coupled to us with a double yoke, shouldering our burdens so they do not weigh us down, showing us how it is done so we can care for others in the same way. Often we wish Jesus would just lift the yoke off our shoulders and relieve us completely of our heavy loads. Unfortunately, life in this world doesn't work that way. Sin and bad luck and happenstance combine to make our lives unpredictable and too often unfair. But God does not abandon us to our burdens. God gives us one who promises never to leave our sides, to plow through life with us and love us without end.

“Ain't it awful?” The answer is yes, life is often awful. But we don't go it alone. Our load is lightened because Jesus shares it. Jesus has been through the most awful events we can imagine. He knows what it means to carry a heavy load; in fact, he drug a cross on his shoulder so that he can then be placed on it and die. Jesus knows the meaning of “awful.” Through his resurrection, Jesus also embodies “grace,” that new life that came to him through the hand of his Father, the new life that is a gift to us without us having to do a thing to earn it. When we come together to celebrate that gift, through bread and wine and water, we discover just what it means to be children of the same Father, being led together to the places that are bursting with abundant life.

Perhaps no one explains this better than Eugene Peterson in his translation of Jesus' words in *The Message Bible.*  Listen and know these words are for you: “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.”

Ain't it wonderful?

Amen.

*Pentecost 5A*

*Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*July 9, 2017*