Pentecost 5 – Proper 9 – Year A

From the 1928 Book of Common Prayer:

***The Comfortable Words***

*Then, facing the People, the Deacon or Priest may rehearse one or more of the following sentences, first saying:*

Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all who truly turn to him.

Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

In the 1928 Book of Common Prayer, the Comfortable Words came after the confession, just before the Offertory. There were a few options of texts that could be read, but these words from Matthew’s Gospel were probably the most commonly used – perhaps because it is the passage that was listed first among the options, or perhaps because it *was* and *is* so comforting!

But the placement of “The Comfortable Words” gives us a hint, I think, of their purpose: to take us from where we have been, what we have done or left undone, into the offering of ourselves as we are, to enter into communion – with one another and with God – and then to be sent forth “to do the work” God has given us to do.

These comfortable words take us from saying with Paul, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” And they lead us once again into the covenant relationship that exists by virtue of our baptism – a relationship that we recognize and celebrate and renew in the breaking of the bread.

And then we are “sent forth.”

The comfortable words are really a call – and the prelude to an invitation to discipleship that follows. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” And then Jesus adds: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.” Take my yoke upon you… The first insight I had about that line years ago is linked to the fact that wooden yokes are made or cut to fit particular oxen. You can’t simply put a yoke made for one animal onto another, without risking that the animal will be harmed by being forced to conform to something that doesn’t fit. It would be like asking someone to run a race in shoes that are a couple sizes too small. The implication is that I cannot wear the yoke made for Wayne. (The Lord knows I cannot even wear a *vestment* made for Wayne!) Adam’s yoke would not fit Mother Teresa. Matthew shows us that even the yokes of John the Baptist and Jesus were not interchangeable. “For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” We are not called to imitate the lives of the saints by wearing their yokes, but by wearing the yoke made for us, and by giving ourselves over as completely as they did to the task of the kingdom set before us.

So when Jesus says, “Take *my* yoke upon you” - what I heard was Jesus saying that the yoke cut to fit him would also fit me, because he has given himself so completely that we are one – that the effect of sharing in the Eucharist is that – as one hymnist has written – we become what we eat. Christ and we are one. Simultaneously, I am called to so closely conform my life to that of Christ that his yoke WILL fit me. And we are thus called to BE Christ in the world now. And in the back of my head I hear again the words of Teresa of Avila: “Christ has no body now but yours…”

The Brakkenstein Community of Blessed Sacrament Fathers in Holland have put it well in their “Rule for a New Brother.” It states: “Following Jesus / does not mean slavishly copying His life. / It means making His choice of life your own/ starting from your own potential / and in the place where you find yourself. / It means living for the values / for which Jesus lived and died. It means following the path He took.”

And that leads me to what came to me on this year’s reading of this passage. I had the more common image of a pair of oxen yoked together. And so I heard the words of Jesus now as an invitation to be yoked *with* him, to be paired with Jesus for the work of the kingdom at hand. “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 learn from him because we are doing the work together, we are going along the way *together.* And in yoking myself to Jesus, I will find rest. The yoke is easy, and the burden is light, because it is a labor of love.

As one commentator puts it, “The invitation to discipleship is … the adoption of a way of life. And this way of life is expressed in terms of doing and being something in relation to Jesus.” If I am willing to take on the yoke of Jesus, I am committing myself to a way of life, lived in relationship.

That really is no more and no less than what we have promised in our baptismal covenant, and what we celebrate in each Eucharist.

Amen.

[Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp9_RCL.html#ot1)[Psalm 45: 11-18](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp9_RCL.html#ps1)*or* [Song of Solomon 2:8-13](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp9_RCL.html#ps3)[Romans 7:15-25a](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp9_RCL.html#nt1)[Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp9_RCL.html#gsp1)