

## Christ's Yoke

At every service of Holy Communion I attended growing up in the Episcopal Church, I heard the 28<sup>th</sup> verse of the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, "Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden and I will refresh you ..." From the first Book of Common Prayer in 1549 until the current Prayer Book published in 1976, this verse and three others were required to be read at every Communion service. They were called "the comfortable words" of our Savior Christ.

For the last 40 plus years reading these verses has been optional and only in Rite I. And their name was changed from "comfortable words" to "The Word of God to all who truly turn to him."

The 28<sup>th</sup> verse of Matthew's 11<sup>th</sup> chapter is followed by two more verses to end the chapter. In these verses, we hear Jesus encouraging the faithful to take his yoke and learn from him. He says that he is gentle and his yoke is easy, his burden light.

Yoke is a strange word from a past reality few of us have ever seen or experienced. A yoke is a bar or instrument binding 2 animals together to pull a plow or wagon. A yoke connects, joins, binds two together.

The ancient Jewish Rabbi's spoke of the yoke of the law, the yoke of the commandments, connecting us with God. In Jesus' day most yokes were made of wood. Jesus, the carpenter may have made these wooden yokes. When he says his yoke is "easy," this Greek word could also be translated "well fitting." Being yoked to Jesus can be a good fit for us. Just what we need. Connected to Christ. This connection, this burden, this relationship is light, fits well when we first know of God's love, of God's gift of grace.

I think of the burdens, the heavy lifting needed as we do the work of ministry and mission. Those going on the mission trip today will know this burden. Renovating houses in New Jersey still recovering from the destruction of the hurricane Sandy is hard work. Construction work is not easy. I worked construction for two full summers while I was in college. In a way construction work is a wonderful parable for the work of ministry and mission.

This work, the call, the burdens Jesus sends us is light only when we know Jesus' love. We can do hard work, difficult ministries because we know God's love and we know we are called to love one another. Love leads to action, to mission, to ministry.

Many see only the demands, the burdens, the requirements of God in Christ and of Christ in the Church. They are turned off to church. The yoke seems to tight, too burdensome, too constraining. It doesn't fit well. Practicing the Christian faith is not light or easy or comfortable; so why bother? Why bother going to Church on a regular basis? Why bother taking on ministry and mission work? Why bother giving your time, talent or a serious financial donation? The

reality of the Christian faith is seen to be too much, too heavy if we don't start with love and if we don't show others the joy we know in God's love and in trying to love others.

Yesterday, I was at Shrine Mont, our diocesan camp and conference center. I went up because my daughter, living in South Carolina, son-in-law and grandson were spending the weekend at the Annual Bishop's Jubilee. My adult daughters loved going to camp at Shrine Mont as children and teenagers. As adults they have often returned and reunited with many young adults they have known since going to camps as children.

I also saw seven of our young people attending three of the camps and four of our young adults who serve as counselors or as the summer staff. Shrine Mont's a place to know God's love and experience God's refreshment. It is a place of tremendous joy. I know that's why so many of us here at Grace look forward to our parish weekend in September at Shrine Mont.

Life has many burdens. We know the weariness of pain, of illness, of conflict, of stress. Jesus promises us love and grace. Christ's yoke fits each one of us uniquely, individually. For each person Christ's yoke is a connection, a binding to love.

Romans 7:15-25a  
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30