
Homily

A Sermon by the Reverend Bill Harkins

3 Pentecost^o Proper 9^o Year A

Mikell Chapel

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen. Good morning, and welcome to each of you on this third Sunday after Pentecost, a day on which we hear a surprisingly challenging Gospel text. And, we prepare for the 4th of July celebrations tomorrow, giving thanks for our founding mothers and fathers and for the glorious freedoms which they won for us. We also give thanks in this season for those who continue to serve our country to preserve those freedoms, and they and their families are in our prayers.

God willing, I will celebrate this July 4th as I have the past 34, running down Peachtree with 50,000 of my closest friends. In the spring of 1977, having just graduated from college, I lamented to my best friend and track teammate Mark Edwards that my running days were likely over. I was a good division III quarter-miler, but not even close to being fast enough to compete at the post-collegiate level. "Your career isn't over," my distance runner friend Mark said, "because we are running Peachtree together, and I will help you, and we will run together." "In your dreams," I said. "Exactly," he replied. And so he did, and we did, and I will say more about that in a moment.

Today's Gospel from Matthew is not unlike a symphony in three parts, each section of which is rich, and provocative. I don't know about you, but some parts of this Gospel text are easier for me to hear than others. Writ large, Matthew Chapter 11 explores various responses to Jesus and his ministry, and each one in its way is paradoxical and potentially perturbing. In his parable about the difference between himself and John, Jesus compares the people to fickle children who keep changing the playground rules to suit the whim of the moment. John came "neither eating nor drinking," and they saw him as too old school—they wanted him to lighten up. Jesus came wanting to dance, eat, drink, and be merry, and they called him a drunk and a glutton. We seem to want something in the middle that won't threaten our autonomy, complacency, and perhaps our mediocrity.

In verses 25-26, we are reminded that some forms of wisdom cannot be obtained by working harder and harder for them. Knowledge of God, it seems, cannot be achieved through the ordinary means of excellence of effort or dent of perseverance as we typically understand both of these. I don't know about you, but this perspective turns my normal ways of being and doing in the world upside down. Jesus has a way of doing that, of course, but it still catches me off guard. What might it mean if through hard work and my often "type A" behavior, I am sometimes missing the point Jesus is making and, perhaps, the main purpose of our lives as Christians? Can I really reconcile this part of me with the need to become more childlike in my faith?

And then in vs. 28-30 we find the lovely invitation to which these passages have been building, "Come to me all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest, for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." It is a wonderful metaphor, really, although in our part of the world we don't often see yokes. The principle, however, is that of bearing burdens more efficiently, to harness the power of the animal or, in some cases the person carrying the load, and work together as a team. The second century author Justin Martyr said that when Jesus worked as a carpenter, he likely made yokes as part of his daily work. I like to imagine this. It is comforting, somehow, to imagine him carefully measuring and

fitting the yoke so that it would fit just right" not rub or scrape the animals" and help them bear the burden of the plow or whatever they may have been pulling. I can see him sanding the rough spots, carefully fitting the yoke, making it a perfect complement to the animal, and the task at hand. Metaphorically speaking, Jesus invites us to take a yoke just like this, made by his own labor and love, perfectly and completely for us. He knows each of us by name, knows our gifts and graces, our needs and broken places. He does not want us to be weighed down or so weary that we cannot bear what we have been called to do. It is a beautiful, utterly simple invitation, and yet so hard to do. So often Vicky, my wife of almost 30 years, has said "Why didn't you ask for help with this?" or, "why didn't you let us know what you needed?" Perhaps this is connected to the other part of this Gospel text" the part about letting go of trying so hard to do things alone, and relying solely on our own alleged wisdom and intelligence. Over-functioning, once we learn it, can be very hard to change. I confess that I do not turn things over to God, or others, easily. And, I have trouble remembering that there are others standing by ready to help. I struggle to realize that I am likely at my best, and my strongest, when I ask for God's help.

A few weeks ago I traveled to the Grand Gulch/Cedar Mesa area of Utah, near the Four Corners of the southwestern U.S. It is wild, beautiful country, the ancestral home of the Anasazi, who were the predecessors of our modern day Puebloan tribes. We spent 5 days backpacking off the grid in this remote wilderness, and the night before our trip, our guide worked with us to divide up the food and water so that we distributed the weight equally, and efficiently. Before the trip I spent time selecting a new backpack that fit me just right, and enabled me to carry food and gear such that it suited my frame and hiking ability. As we hiked into the deep canyon on the first day, I remember being thankful for the shared effort, and humbled by the comfort I took in the camaraderie of our small band of adventurers in this exotic, strange land. Our guide knew the land well, knew the best camping spots and what to do in case of an emergency. It is so hard for us sometimes to ask for help, and to depend on others. After all, tomorrow we will celebrate Independence Day, and this is a virtue highly prized in our country. In the wilderness of Utah that week, I celebrated Dependence Day every mile of our trip. You might say we were yoked together, and I was glad for it every step of the way. And today, Jesus says to give thanks for those who get this message, those who really understand it, like children, who are dependent, transparent, and open. Too often I want to handle things myself. Too often I am reluctant to use my real strength, which is to hand those burdens over to the living Christ.

Tomorrow morning as I run down Peachtree, and run past this beloved community, I will give thanks for my friend Mark who, 35 years ago, said, "Let me help you train, and we will run Peachtree together." Back then six miles seemed a very long way for this erstwhile sprinter to run. Mark later helped me train for my first marathon, and we ran every Peachtree Road Race together until the summer of 1992, when he was fighting metastatic melanoma. Shortly before he died at age 39, he asked me to keep running Peachtree for us both, a promise I have endeavored to keep. Some years have been harder than others, and living into this commitment to myself and my dear friend has revealed my broken places, my fears, aches, pains, and often, my weariness" my heavy burdens, including the very loss of the friend whose memory I sought to honor. I could not have done that on my own. Over the years I have come to realize the gift of Mark's friendship, and the secret mystery at the heart of it. I had to give up the burden of thinking that I needed to do things on my own and receive the gift of letting go" a loving gift my wife and sons have taught me as well" and to live into the light burden at the center of Jesus' message to us today. Being yoked to something we need to let go of, such as my tendency to do it all by myself, is the only requirement for allowing Christ to give us a new yoke, just right for each of us, lovingly made. All those years of running have really been about love, and that is a yoke devoutly to be wished and prayed for. A funny thing happened on the way down Peachtree. I lost myself in the process. As the wonderful poet Mary Oliver has said: "And what do I risk to tell you this, which is all I know? Love yourself. Then forget it. Then love the world." *Come to me all you that are weary and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Amen.*