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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Pentecost /Proper 9/Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45:11-18; Romans 7:15-25a;
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30.

“Comfortable Words”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” These words of Jesus from the gospel of Matthew are among the most treasured in all of scripture—at least for me. In Rite I of the Holy Eucharist, this verse is one of the choices for what we call “comfortable words”—words said by the priest after the confession and absolution. They are accurately labeled. They are truly “comfortable” and “comforting” words. We all know what it’s like to carry heavy burdens—to be so worried about big things, or even small things, that we feel like we can hardly breathe or take the next step. The invitation to “let go and let God” is a welcomed one to hear—even if it feels impossible to do. We also find this verse in the service of Compline—a liturgy for the end of the day—that time when we most need to be able to clear our heads of all of the day’s concerns—to shut off all the chatter that endlessly plays--in order to be able to literally rest—to be able to enjoy the wonderful gift of sleep.

Sometimes we overlook the verse that follows this one. “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.” Jesus’ invitation to his listeners is not simply an invitation to take a nap every day. It is an invitation to carry our burdens in a different way. Some of us who have grown up in urban settings may never have known about “yokes”—those wooden contraptions designed to be worn about the neck and shoulders of animals--that either connect

animals to each other so they can work together or distribute the weight being carried more effectively. Yokes are also designed for people who are carrying significant physical weight—like buckets of water—so that the weight can be balanced. Yokes are meant to make work easier, but that doesn't mean that the imagery of wearing a yoke is a positive one in our eyes. We attach that image to the image of slavery.

We haven't been thinking much about slavery this week. It's the time of year that we focus on freedom. Ironically when I was away for a few days over the fourth of July visiting relatives in Washington, D.C., I was also engrossed in reading Margaret Atwood's book—written in the mid-80's—The Handmaid's Tale—a book that is enjoying a resurgence of popularity at this critical time. The setting of the story is a patriarchal theocracy, an authoritarian regime, called Gilead, which has taken over the United States and has completely stripped women of all their civil rights and placed them strategically for the sole purpose of bearing children—in order to deal with an apparent global crisis of low birth rate. Reading this book during the same few days that we were visiting national memorials, memorials to those who have influenced the ongoing evolution of a society which values freedom above all else, made the trip especially poignant. The words carved on stone were particularly meaningful—words like, “I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits.” (MLK, Jr.)

Freedom is always fragile. The founders of our country understood that fragility when they carefully and brilliantly crafted a system to protect it. Freedom is never a given. We take it for granted, but it is always at risk. Someone or some group is ever eager to push a personal

agenda and restrict the freedoms of others. Fear often rears its ugly head and tells us things like, “If we give that group equal freedom, their freedom will impinge on ours and will affect our well-being.” And, so, in our system of government, we are always in a process of sorting it out, with various voices and positions continually weighing in and exerting pressure in order to preserve this precious commodity. It is a slow process that often feels agonizingly slow.

Even though we live in the “land of the free,” we continue to long for another sort of freedom—for greater personal freedom. Freedom from debt—freedom from obligations—freedom from regrets and from guilt—freedom to take risks and follow our dreams. At times, having a sense of personal freedom may seem to be even more fragile than the political sort. Far too many people live in fear within their own homes—victims of domestic violence, not seeing a ways out. Even those of us not in fear for our personal physical safety may live with a feeling of emotional enslavement--of being “tied in knots” inside—even self-inflicted knots.

A Nashville writer (Kara Lassen Oliver) begins her poem entitled “Captivity” with these words:

The most painful captivity is the one we cannot see.

Born to be free.
Nurtured to believe we can accomplish anything.
Groomed to succeed.
Disciplined to excel.

Only to make the great leap and slam into an invisible wall.
To walk forward with confidence and purpose
 only to fall headlong into an unseen chasm
 just short of the goal.

The boundaries of our captivity are unspoken myths that erode our confidence at the crucial moment.” (Weavings, Aug/Sep/Oct, 2014)

We think we are free when we are not. Paul expresses it well. “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it...I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.” We are shaped, and even controlled, by our thoughts—many of which bear little resemblance to reality—and by our personal life stories. They can enslave us—can take away our freedom.

We know that enslavement is not what God wants for us. The most basic story of our faith is a story of liberation—the story of a God who delivers the Hebrew people out of bondage in Egypt into a land of promise. The story is told over and over in Hebrew scripture. The theme of liberation runs throughout. Jesus hears that story countless times and comes to know it as his defining story. And, he lives that story out in such a way that leaves no doubt that freedom in Christ is far more than political or even personal.

As people of faith, we learn that—ironically—our freedom is based on a profound level of surrender. Not only does Paul see his predicament clearly. He has an epiphany—he sees the way out. “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” The answer to his question is clear. Becoming not just a believer—not just a worshipper— but a follower of Jesus is his answer—and is ours. We are rescued from “this body of death” by embracing the gift of God’s love and following Jesus.

In their lives and in their words, Jesus and Paul and others who have followed them—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King, Jr.--tell us that our calling as followers of Christ leads to a different sort of freedom—a freedom on the other side of bearing the yoke—on the other side of letting go—on the other side of suffering. Jesus doesn’t say that, when we

come to him, we will find rest for our bodies. He says that we will find rest for our souls. We will find the peace of God which surpasses all understanding—not determined by outer circumstances but by the thorough knowledge that we are not our own—that we belong to a God whose nature is steadfast love and mercy—to a God who is “gentle and humble in heart”—who is always ready to tell us the story of freedom again and again and to show us the path to surrender into fulness of life. Amen.