
A Recipe for Grace

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Proper 9 – Year A

Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. “Come to me, all you that are weary and are 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.” —Matthew 11:25-30

In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen.

Good morning, and welcome to each of you as we continue our journey in the long green season of Pentecost. In today’s Gospel from Matthew we are reminded that some forms of wisdom cannot be obtained by working ourselves into a state of weariness. Knowledge of God, it seems, cannot always be achieved through excellence of effort or dent of perseverance. 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 our “type A” behavior, we sometimes missing the point Jesus is making and, perhaps, even 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 verses 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. The principle is that of bearing burdens *more efficiently*. 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 think of him carefully fitting the yoke so that it would fit just right and bear the burden of the plow. I can see him sanding the rough spots, carefully fitting the yoke, making it a perfect complement to the task at hand. Similarly, I like to think that Jesus 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 the good work we have been called to do.

Ronald Rolheiser has reminded us that there are clear, distinct moments within the Paschal cycle. Each is part, he says, of one process of transformation, of letting go and embracing, so as to receive new life and new spirit. Good Friday challenges each of us to name our losses and deaths. Easter asks of us that we claim our births. The forty days requires that we grieve what we have lost and adjust to the new reality. Ascension is letting go of the old and letting it bless us, and Pentecost, the long green season into which we have just returned, is the reception of the new spirit for the new life that we are in fact now living. The paschal mystery should set us free to mourn unrealistic expectations about our bodies, our relationships, our institutions, our families, and yes, our churches. So in this sense transformation is less about becoming someone or something new than about becoming in fact more authentically who we are, including the shadow parts of ourselves we may resist, may prefer to deny, may not like very much. One of my mentors suggested that a primary task of our lives is to grieve appropriately, remain resilient, and embrace the new normal. We can stay stuck in our mistrust of change, or we can see the Spirit in Her mischievousness as Comforter, creator, and, as the Psalm says, “renewer”; as a source, that is, of strength and wisdom. We face many losses, many “Good Fridays” in our lives and the choice is ours whether those will be

terminal—snuffing out life and spirit—or paschal, opening us to new life and spirit. And we must not let fear of change keep us in bondage. As Roy Batty says at the end of the underappreciated film *Blade Runner*, “Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That's what it is to be a slave.” I wish I could say I've never been afraid of change, that this fear has never held me in bondage, but that would be a lie.

When I was growing up, my maternal grandparents had a small farm in north Georgia. Some of you have heard me speak of it. It was a sanctuary for me. My maternal grandmother, whose face I see when I imagine God, always welcomed me into that sacred space where it did not matter how many touchdowns I had or had not scored the Friday before. Her love was unconditional, and she created a beloved community around her I have sought to co-create ever since. And just as we come back again and again to the Paschal stories of our lives, our loves and losses, our failures and triumphs, we return again and again to the deep narratives of our lives, and as we revisit them, we learn from them, and in so doing always, as one author said, *we begin again*. My relationship to scripture is like this, re-remembering, re-engaging and learning anew for each new season of life. One of the outward and visible signs of my grandmother's love was her pound cake, always waiting for me on the kitchen table with a cold glass of milk when I returned from the fields, woods, or lake. When Vicky and I were in graduate school and our boys were very young, we visited the farm before heading back to Nashville to school and the lives we had so tenuously begun to co-create. My grandmother asked me to join her in the kitchen to bake pound cakes to take back to Tennessee, and curiously, she asked me to write down the recipe. I protested, reminding her that she knew the recipe by heart, but she insisted. I obediently observed and wrote the steps and ingredients in her cookbook, and we wrapped the last pound cakes she ever made into wax paper and aluminum foil. Two weeks later she was gone. I drove to the farm after her funeral, broken hearted and feeling alone. I could not imagine a world without her in it. And I saw the dining room table, empty of pound cake, and I felt afraid. Then, I remembered the recipe, and that last day with her. I realized she must have known something, and was giving the recipe to me, and that it wasn't really even about the pound cake, but about the beloved community, and the compassion and love which were her gifts to me, a load lighter for the love that bore it, and a yoke less burdensome. And it was an invitation to move beyond Good Friday to Easter, and on into Pentecost, to the gift of the spirit in the life I was already living. I could live into the new reality and find grace and life abundant in that new season, and she had given me, well, the recipe to do so, through her love. In remembering her now, and recalling and retelling this story, I do so as Vicky and I approach our 35th wedding anniversary, having promised again for new seasons in our lives, and we begin to think about next steps, now as the grandparents of twins. And I see my grandmother—and the story I just shared with you—through the new perspectives that these life cycle changes have provided. Somehow, I see the grandfather I would become reflected in her eyes way back then, as if she could in her wisdom see me then as I am now, and love that person too, and the great-great grandchildren she would not live to see, and I am so very grateful. I imagine her, as she was then, handing me the pound cake as I am now, a grandfather. And in so doing I understand in a new way how when we celebrate the Eucharist we do so sharing in time and space that first Eucharist, and this one, and all those to come, as if time is in those moments is standing still, which in fact it is doing. I hear Jesus' familiar and comforting words, yes once again, but I am not the same person who heard them before. I see new wisdom in a childlike faith, and the apophatic “not-knowing” it bespeaks or, as Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan said, “*I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now.*” Each new day brings new fears that threaten to keep us in bondage and in spite of this, remarkably, Jesus tells us not to be afraid, and that he will give rest to our souls. We may not always be sure where we are going, or even if we can keep on going, but then, as Wendell Berry said,

“It may be that when we no longer know what to do,
we have come to our real work
and when we no longer know which way to go,
we have begun our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.”

The wonderful poet Seamus Heaney's last words in this earthly life were written, not spoken. From his hospital bed he texted to his wife and lifelong love, Marie, two words: *Noli timere*. Don't be afraid. These were words of courage for his beloved at a moment when God was about to do a profoundly new thing that she did not yet fully perceive. *Noli timere*. Fear not. Words of courage for us and for all of God's beloved, uttered throughout Holy Scripture by prophets, poets, angels, and Jesus, himself, whenever God is about to do a new thing. We are to be unafraid, even in the face of that new thing we do not yet quite perceive; that new thing that will inevitably draw us from the security of the familiar, because God has given us to Jesus and to one another, to be the body of Christ the Spirit working as our advocate in our lives, in

this place, here and now. This is the journey of the Paschal mystery, ending and beginning with Pentecost...ordinary time, and the hope of a yoke not so burdensome or fearful. 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. My yoke is easy, my burden is light. Together, sisters and brothers, we can do this hard thing, whatever it may be, without fear. After all, we have the recipe. *Amen.*

© The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.