

**SERMON- Proper 9 (A)**  
**Charles R. Cowherd**

**St. Timothy's (Herndon)**  
**July 9, 2023**

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67

Psalm 45: 11-18

Romans 7:15-25a

**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

**OPENING:**

Throughout my life, after I meet people for the first time and say my name “Charles Cowherd,” someone will invariably come up to me and say, quite breathlessly: “I bet your ancestors,, hear me out, I reckon that they herded cows..... Have you ever thought of that?”

In response, if I am feeling particularly salty, I say:

“Gosh, NO ONE has ever said that, certainly not starting in the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade to torment me endlessly with all sorts of variations and formulations of my last name.”

So, I am indeed fully aware of my last name, but sadly there are no former cowherds among the Cowherds in recent years, and I can safely say I know nothing about it.

**YOKE:**

But I am in good company, because Jesus does not seem to know that much about cowherding, at least not from this story.

He talks about a yoke, which of course is a device put around farm animals to get them to do work. And he uses it in our Gospel to describe what discipleship is like:

*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.<sup>1</sup>*

The yoke was a standard metaphor from the Old Testament<sup>2</sup> used to talk about the journey in faith.

Jesus used such images from his context and community to explain his message, to illustrate what the Kingdom of God is like.

He does so here and obviously in the parables.

Sometimes they make literal sense and our feeble brains can grasp them: like, don't build a house on sand, it will wash away.

Other times, he gives a different type of message, that makes less sense.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11.29-30

<sup>2</sup> Sirach 51.23-27.

Jesus, for example, would have been a very bad Shepherd, from a financial standpoint, going off to find the 1 rather than the 99.

He would have been a very bad money manager, telling the woman to look all up and down the floorboards for the lost coin rather than just consider it lost, and a “sunk cost.”

And don’t get me started on his wage system, paying people the same amount of money regardless of how much they worked.

And he would be a very bad farmer, because he is saying that we should stick our heads in the yoke with him and we can share the burden.

Because all that would happen, in real life, is for us to go in circle. Jesus would be doing all the work because we cannot bear it.

In these instances, Jesus is talking about the upside-down, paradoxical nature of the kingdom. And it’s hard to understand.

## **COMFORTABLE WORDS**

It's even harder to understand because Jesus’ words are known to us (particularly at the 8 AM!) as the “COMFORTABLE WORDS” in our prayer book. These Comfortable Words were offered after the Confession and after the Absolution by the Priest, repeating Jesus’ words in order to indeed “comfort” the people prior to the Peace and receiving Communion.<sup>3</sup>

The “Comfortable Words” though were not about relaxation or reclining, not about feeling good about yourself and getting ‘comfy.’

“Comfort” in this usage means “support” or “Strengthen” or “fortify.”

The United States Constitution features that sense of the word when it gives the definition of treason as giving “comfort to the enemy.”<sup>4</sup>

The whole passage starts to pivot when you understand the word in that sense.

Jesus is, unfortunately, not giving us a yoke that is easy, but rather one that he will share with us, and in which he will strengthen, fortify and comfort us as we bear it together.

So when Jesus says “rest”, he does not mean an existential peace or a vacation, he means a sense of God’s presence.

When he says “easy, he means not the opposite of hard but rather “good.”

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<sup>3</sup> Only in Rite I currently, and optional. Used to be mandatory (BCP, pg. 332.)

<sup>4</sup> Article III, Section 3, Clause 1.

Thus, they are comfortable words, but they are not cushy, they are steeling us for what will happen next.

Liturgically, they come right after we have confessed our sins and been absolved. Our next task is to go to our neighbor and be reconciled, and then we are go to the altar and commune with God.

We need COMFORT to do that, we need strength, we need fortification. Jesus gives us that.

## **CHURCH:**

What does this mean in a larger sense? To us, practically?

I think it's okay to say that Church is hard.

A life of discipleship is hard,

And it's only easy because it's worth it. That's why it's called "worship."

My friend (the same one who said he was 'Religious and Not Spiritual') says we do people a big disservice by saying that Church is easy and is fun.

It's not, not really.

We should not pretend that it is. It has its moments, a beautiful hymn here, a preacher that gets lucky with a good sermon there. But it's hard, waking up, dressing up, sitting in hard pews, listening to old language, surrounded by a bunch of sinners and saints. That you then have to be a part of a community with them.

It's at the very least uncomfortable,

You might ask then. "Why then, Cowherd, should we come?"

The comfort is that you are free from the burden of those things that were placed on you out there, that we have been lugging around as our own yoke.

The desire to achieve is a huge burden,

the compulsion to buy and consume is overwhelming heavy,

the addiction to be kicked is more than we can carry.

We worship those things out there, we pretend like they make us comfortable.

Only to hear the voice of the Shepherd, (not a Cowherd) calling out and saying, you don't have to carry that. Come into this place, set that yoke down, I will carry it for you. It's not going to be easy, but you will not be alone.

## **NON-LITURGICAL CHURCH**

Getting salty again, the reason that Megachurches pack people in on a Sunday is because they make it so comfortable. There is someone in the parking lot to direct you to a spot, and escort you in. You can get coffee at a coffee bar and bring it in to the sanctuary. The seats are comfy, and when the lights go down, you don't have to look at anyone.

There is none of the Episcopal aerobics where you have to sit down and stand up

every five seconds. You can just stay in your seat watch a service with incredible production values with a preacher with white teeth and skinny jeans, who is going to tell you what you want to hear, and say that because you are inside this place, you have won the race.

## **LAST WEEK**

Enough of that, let's take a look at ourselves.

Our own-misbegotten slogan in the Episcopal Church is "The Episcopal Church welcomes you" Do we?

And welcomes into what?

I had a friend who said she was in her 20's and showed up at church as a newcomer, the first week they told her: "you are welcome here, don't worry we won't ask you to introduce yourself."

Second week, she showed up, they said "you are welcome here, and don't worry we will never ask you for money."

3<sup>rd</sup> week, she showed up, "you are welcome, don't worry, this is the Episcopal Church, you don't have to check your brain at the door"

4<sup>th</sup> Week: "You are welcome here and you won't have to serve on a million committees.

We are actually asking people to do all those things, or we should. And it might be hard, it might be uncomfortable but it's worth it, it's worthy of your time, and Saviour who loves will carry the load for you.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Let me end on a lighter note, my wife chided me last week for not citing *her* when I said that our young children should be so proud and they deserve a lot of points for sitting through the Bishop's long sermon, and she was the one who said that the adults deserved similar praise for sitting through that long sermon..

It reminded us of the time we went to my brother's Russian Orthodox wedding. Beautiful ceremony, gorgeous church.

3 hours long. Orthodox love the Trinity, you do everything 3 times.

Worse off, there are no seats. Only around the edge for pregnant women and the enfeebled.

The congregation, the worshipping community stands at the center, for the entire service, uncomfortable, but they are a people on the move, being carried by Jesus were true rest lies.

**AMEN<sup>5</sup>**

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<sup>5</sup> [Pews vs. standing: an Orthodox controversy - Rod Dreher \(beliefnet.com\)](http://beliefnet.com)