

July 6, 2014 Yoked to Christ

Gospel text: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

This hangs in my office. It is an ox yoke.

I thought I would tell you that for those of you who weren't raised on a farm.

Most of us learned about this the old fashioned way; through school.

A plow would be attached here, the heads of two oxen would go here...

the oxen would pull the plow through the field.

This particular model is a training yoke for young oxen.

When oxen are fully grown, they get a full-size yoke.

It's much bigger, heavier, and stronger, because the animals are bigger, heavier, and stronger.

Do you know that the word *yoke* appears 70 times in the Bible? That's right.

In the Bible, it has two meanings.

First, is the practical, literal meaning: the work tool of oxen.

In the Parable of the Great Dinner, Luke chapter 14, one person turned down the invitation to God's great banquet feast with these words: *I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.*

The story of Job begins with a description of his wealth in chapter one.

In verse three, we read that he had *five hundred yoke of oxen.*

The Bible also uses the word *yoke* in a second way.

You can understand that word in a figurative way.

To be yoked means two things are held together in a relationship.

That's what we find in our Gospel reading.

We are yoked in a variety of ways. Take, for example, the yoke of friendship.

To be yoked to a friend means that you are connected to them.

You spend time together...you enjoy life together.

Friends share common interests: fishing, coffee, music, golfing.

Friends are also people you can count on. They are there when you need them.

Whether you have some feelings you want to express, or some ideas you want to think through, or you need help with a project, friends are there to help.

Friends are great. They make life worth living.

They are part of how God blesses us.

But friends are also imperfect.

They are sinful, as St. Paul reminds us in our New Testament reading from Romans.

Friends say stupid things.

Sometimes you are not there when you are needed.

Often friends will blow it...even big time.

Having said that, you are still yoked to friends.

They are still worth having. They are still meaningful. They are still blessing. Imperfectly, incompletely; and yet, yoked.

The language of being yoked is also used for marriage.
 When you marry someone, your life and their life are joined together.
 You commit yourself to each other.
 You are bound to each other.
 What happens to you happens to them, and vice versa.
 You are connected in the little things and the big things.
 You are yoked together.

There is something deeply meaningful about that.
 To have a life partner, a soul mate, is such a great thing.
 A spouse understands you...appreciates you...accepts you just as you are.
 On your deathbed, when you look back on your life, the one person who made the most difference for you is your spouse.
 What a blessing.

Remember St. Paul?
 Remember how Lutheran Christians understand people as saint AND sinner?
 Boy, can you see that in your spouse.
 We make countless jokes about the burden of our wife or husband.
 Truth be told, their blindspots, anxieties, foibles, and misconceptions impinge upon you.
 Likewise, your sinfulness impinges upon them.
 It can be downright challenging to be married.

And yet, marriage can be so meaningful...so strengthening...so life-giving.
 To be yoked to another, to share love with another, is such a blessing.
 Imperfectly, incompletely, marriage makes life worth living.
 Yoked in marriage.
 On this 4th of July weekend, may I also suggest that one can be yoked to a nation.
 Our politicians ride in the parades.
 People dress in the colors of our country.
 It has been a very patriotic week.
 I consider being American to be a genuine blessing from God.
 It's so great to be a member of a country, a part of a people.
 Yoked to a nation.

I have watched some of the football games in the World Cup.
 On Friday, I watched the game between Brazil and Columbia.
 I noticed that everybody sang their national anthem: the fans, the players, the coaches, even the children. With gusto.
 During the World Cup play, I especially liked the crowd scenes.
 I enjoy deeply watching people thoroughly passionate about cheering on their nation's team.
 The Algerian fans were my favorite.
 It reminds me that other people love their country as much as I love mine.

And yet each of our countries have major faults.
Remember St. Paul: we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.
That's true of our country, too.
And all the other countries as well.
Imperfectly, incompletely.
But in spite of it all, we remain yoked to, in relationship with, a nation of people.

In our Gospel reading today, Matthew paints us a picture of Jesus in the intimate moment of prayer.

Jesus is having a conversation with the heavenly Father.

In the midst of that prayer, Jesus speaks a profound truth...

and invites you and me to faith.

He says, 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.

Clearly, he is not talking about an ox yoke, a wooden harness built for work.

He is talking about relationship.

He invites you to be yoked with him...to live in relationship with him...to be grounded in him.

You, my friends, have been called.

You are God's people.

You have been chosen and yoked to Christ.

What a blessing!

Pure grace.

Yoked to Christ brings a deep satisfaction.

Yoked to Christ brings an inner peace that calms the raging seas.

Yoked to Christ brings a lighthouse for guidance and direction.

Yoked to Christ means strength in times of weakness and hope amidst despair.

Perfectly, completely, satisfying like nothing else can.

Take my yoke upon you and you will find rest for your soul.

That's your invitation to faith.

Peace to you, my brothers and sisters in Christ.