



Sermons from

“Independence Day Revisited”

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July 3, 2011

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11:16-19, 24-30

We all know that tomorrow is the fourth of July. That fact makes these first few days in July the Fourth of July Weekend. The actual day of the fourth of July is the day when we, with allegiances to the United States of America, celebrate our national independence. It is the time we give thanks to God for our freedom, for our independence from foreign tyranny, that in turn extends to freedom in so many other realms.

The weekend itself, which lengthens this holiday that has with a singular date attached to it, is beloved by almost everyone. One exception is the parents of young children whose bedtimes are obliterated for several days as the days are long and fireworks late and loud. The other is aging dogs who, when the blasts and whistles of fireworks add to the excitement of summer evenings, seek refuge behind the couch or in the basement or on their owner's laps, even if the canine weighs 75 pounds. But otherwise, most of us thrill to this time of picnics, parades, the grand patriotic music of the likes of John Philip Sousa and George M. Cohan, and visual adornment of everything in red, white and blue. Celebrating freedom and independence is indeed fun, but undergirding the hoopla is this fundamental truth: freedom is a gift from God.

Freedom did not come easy to our country. Nor does it come easy to us as individuals. Reformer Martin Luther reminds us “The Christian is both rightful and sinful.” The Apostle Paul states how this reality plays itself out. *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hated....For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”* Paul then poses the question that any one logically asks as a way to free one's self from this dilemma: *“Who will rescue me?”*

We all know the answer: Christ is the answer. Christ will rescue us. In Christ is where we find true freedom. In Christ is where independence from debilitating sin lies. The trick is to find ways to let our saintly nature overcome our sinful ways. The way to live a life worthy of Christ and of God is to answer Christ's call to “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,” and then accept the rest Christ offers, not what the world cries out for us to do or be.

I need not spend much time rehearsing the ironies of our modern lives in which we are constantly seeking ways to be free from one thing so we can be free for something else. Too often we succumb to freedoms that only lead to self-indulgence. Too often we are confronted with more choices than we can handle. As someone has observed, too often we have nothing more interesting to do than try and fulfill our every desire, consuming, indulging, accumulating. His conclusion is that while our democracy has given us the freedom to get what we want, we are not given enough guidance in discerning what is worth having. Given how easy succumbing to our sinful nature is, Paul's question remains front and center: “Who can deliver me from this slavery?”

The answer is in the gospel lesson. But I must warn you, it comes in the form of a paradox. Real freedom comes with a cost. Something for nothing is not God's way. There is no free lunch. God gives us everything while asking for one thing in return: complete obedience. Freedom without responsibility is really not freedom.

Here is the paradox: we must be dependent so we can be independent. Regarding our physical nature, we who are dependent upon eye glasses or hearing aids for better seeing or hearing gain independence we would not have were we not dependent upon them. Do you know the legend that birds first had no wings, and that they rebelled when wings were given because the wings seemed to be a burden? Yet, when the birds accepted their wings, that very burden lifted them to the sky.

That is the way it is with Christ. When Christ invites us with the words "*Come to me...*," the weight of the yoke is what gives wings to our souls. Christ himself wore a yoke, the yoke of total obedience to God. Why should it be any less for us?

Jesus, as the son of a carpenter and a carpenter himself, had to have known a great deal about yokes. Just as he wore a spiritual yoke, we can imagine that he made countless yokes in Joseph's carpenter shop. So, he was familiar with all the implications of what he said to his followers.

While many of us are not very familiar with yokes, most of us know that traditionally a yoke is a wooden beam shaped often so a team of animals, often oxen, can work together. The term *yoke* suggests both work, and, at the same time, making work easier when shared with another. To be yoked to something or someone can be a metaphor for the oppressive demands of a harsh ruler, a nation's enslavement or the tyranny of religious legalism. I have to believe that all of us have known harsh, domineering, tyrannical people. We know that governments, even in a land where liberty is a bedrock of a nation's founding principles, can be unjust. And any religion based on "shoulds" and "oughts," legalisms and outsized personalities, courts damage and disaster for its followers.

You may still be wondering about the yoke Christ offers us to share with him. You may be wondering about how following Christ makes your burden light, when the discipleship Christ offers is costly. Perhaps the words of C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* are helpful in discovering the true freedom the Apostle Paul seeks and Christ offers. Lewis says: "As long as your own personality is what you are bothering about, you are not going to (Jesus) at all. The very first step is to try to forget about the self altogether. Your real, new self...will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him." Lewis concludes: "...Give up yourself and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it...Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead."

All this suggests to me that at the heart of the Christian gospel, which proclaims freedom from sin and freedom for discipleship, is the paradoxical claim that only by being dependent upon Christ can we be independent...free...to live unselfish lives that are accurate reflections of what God wills of us.

St. Augustine, whose early years embodied more sinner than saint, after his conversion came to realize that freedom means not to do what we want to do, but to be free to be who God intends us to be.

Yes, a yoke is a yoke, but as someone has observed, Christ's yoke is easy because it is lined with love. It is with love that Christ offers the words of love, "Come to me." They are words of invitation, invitation to the Lord's Table this morning, invitation into partnership, invitation to have our burdens lifted, invitation to find rest for weary souls finally too tired to try and go it alone any more, invitation to liberation from too much of some things and too little of others, invitation to be his followers, his disciples.

When Jesus says “*Come to me,*” can we not feel the kindness in his voice, the gentleness and the genuineness in his outstretched hand? Can we not sense his desire for a relationship with you and me? Can we not hear his prayer that our lives have meaning and direction? Can we not understand his wish that the yoke choking you and the burden bending me over be shared with him and fellow Christians?

Friends, hear this good news as Independence Day is revisited again this year:

When we feel the kindness, the gentleness, of Christ’s hand....

When we sense a new intensity of relationship with Christ...

When we are given a prayer to pray...

When we just know in our gut and our heart that what is choking us and crippling us and keeping us from being all we can be and all God wants us to be should not have the last word...

That is when we begin to understand that Christ’s words “Come unto me..” are for us and that our yoke will be easy and our burden light. Our yoke will be easy and our burden light because we will have begun to realize that we are his and he is ours, and that we are working with him.

Thanks be to God for this inexpressible gift of the freedom in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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