

“True Freedom”

Dear friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus as we gather on this holiday weekend to thank God for the freedom we have as a people and to remember the responsibilities and the calling inherent with having received such a wonderful gift.

This year (as you know) is the 241st birthday of our country. That's a long time for a nation to be free. As a country, we have as great (if not greater) opportunity than any other in this world to live as we choose and to make a difference for the greater and the common good.

In spite of the many things that are wrong in our country, there are many things that are right. We dare not forget how privileged we are and how important it is for us (moving forward) to not forget the sacrifice of the past.

Before turning to our text for today, let me share with you (as we've done in years past) a few quotes from some of those who have gone before us in our history. And, as I read what they had to say (back then), you decide (for yourself) whether their words still carry any weight (for us) today.

From George Washington (during his farewell address to the nation): “Do not let anyone claim tribute of American patriotism if they even attempt to remove religion from politics.”

From Benjamin Franklin: “We have been assured in the sacred writings of Scripture (he says) that ‘unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain that build it.’”

From John Quincy Adams: “We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made for a moral and religious people; it is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

From Calvin Coolidge: “The foundations of our society and our government rest so much on the teachings of the Bible that it would be difficult to support them if faith in these teachings would cease to be practically universal in our country.”

From General Douglas MacArthur: “History fails to record a single precedent in which nations subject to moral decay have not passed into political and economic decline. There has been either a spiritual awakening to overcome the moral lapse, or a progressive deterioration leading to ultimate national disaster.”

And from Pope John Paul II, consistent with so much of what he said and did during his life: “Every generation of Americans needs to know that true freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.” (End of quotes.)

Let's turn to God in prayer. Father, we thank you for the gift we have in this nation, living as we do in a free land. We thank you for the sacrifices made throughout our history to ensure that our freedom might continue. As we turn now to your Word and to what you have to say to us, help us to hear your words and to be shaped by them that what we do and how we live might give honor to Jesus. Amen.

Let's get right into it. The title for our message today is “True Freedom;” (True Freedom). Taken from the eleventh chapter of Matthew's gospel, it's a passage that not only ties in with what we're remembering and celebrating this week (as a nation), living as we are as a free people, but one that also speaks of one of the greatest paradoxes you'll ever find in the Christian faith.

Only as we submit ourselves to Christ and to his rule and authority in our lives, will we ever truly be free. Only as we entrust our lives to his care, turn over the burdens and the worries and the (fears of our lives) will we ever find the rest we need.

Remember what Jesus says? (He says), “Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me (he says), 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.”

Before going too far into what Jesus is saying, let's start with a question. (You tell me.) Is there anything in your life that you're carrying that's starting feel like a burden? Are there any things in your life that are causing you to feel worried or weary or weighed down?

If there is, this passage was written for you. If there are, the words of our Lord are ones you need to hear. There's a freedom that comes from giving your burdens to Jesus. There's a rest you'll find (in your life) as you entrust your worries to Christ.

It doesn't matter what it is. Jesus can carry it. Relationship burdens, financial burdens, work-related burdens, burdens from your health, anxieties in your life? It doesn't matter. Give those burdens to Jesus, and you'll find rest. Take the yoke he has to offer (and give him yours) and you'll be set free.

A while back, there was a story on National Public Radio, maybe you heard it, (I might have shared this), about a club that was formed in a High School in Connecticut. It was called the "Power Nap Club." The way it worked was that the students (who belonged to the club) would go to a room at the end of the school day, where they would turn off all the lights, put their heads on their desks, plug in a tape of quiet music, and for thirty minutes, (before they did anything else) they would take a "power nap." Their club tee-shirts were decorated with a cardinal (the school mascot) wearing a nightcap on his head. Inscribed on the tee-shirt was a new version of an old Latin motto, "Veni, Vidi, dormivi: I came, I saw, I slept!"

The irony (in what they were doing), if not the wisdom, was in the fact that the club was formed, not because these were lazy students, but exactly the opposite. In order to be considered for membership (and to qualify), you had to be active in the school, be a good student, and volunteer time in the community. (It was a requirement.) In other words, this club was not for students who were slackers, but for those who were tired, who were working hard and (as a result), who needed a rest.

In our text today, Jesus isn't talking about a club (he's forming) for those wanting to take a nap. He is, however, talking about a rest that can be found only in him, and about a freedom that comes from choosing in your life to submit.

In the words he shares, he talks about a "yoke" he wants us to carry. (He says), "Come to me and take my yoke." (He says), "Learn from me, spend time with me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

What's a yoke? There are all kinds of yokes. In Jesus' day, the most common yoke was a wooden crosspiece placed over the necks of two oxen as they carried together a heavy load. If the yoke was well-fitted, the oxen could do a tremendous work. They could carry loads together that by themselves they never could. But if it was not well-fitted, it wouldn't take long before it would begin to rub and cause pain and sooner or later become a greater weight than the burden in itself. Now, the burden was still there, (it wouldn't go away), but it was manageable. It could be carried. It could be borne and maintained when given a well-fitted yoke.

In our text today, Jesus says the same thing. He doesn't come to us and promise that our problems will go away. (That's not what he does.) Not at all! You might have problems in your life that have been with you for a long time. You might have problems in your life that will be with you for a long time. That's not the promise.

Jesus doesn't promise to eliminate our problems, but he does tell us he has a yoke for us that can enable us to continue on. "Take My yoke," Jesus says, "and let me help. "I know what you're facing (he says) and (I know) it's not easy, but this is one designed and fitted for your life."

In their original context, these (words of our Lord) were spoken to a people who had become burdened by the demands of Jewish law. (That's what they were carrying.) What was originally offered as a gift in the Old Testament, (God's Law); it had been so misused and abused (by those in power) that it had become a yoke (and a burden) that was weighing them down. There was no way they could follow.

What does Jesus do? He doesn't take away the law (this gift from God), but he makes it manageable. When asked which law was the most important...What does he do? Jesus says there are only two. (Don't make it so hard). (He says), "Love God" and "Love your neighbor." (That's all there is.) "On these two laws (he says), that's all you need to know."

Now take that example and apply it to what Jesus says in our text (and what do you have)? Jesus doesn't come along to take away our yoke, (to invite us to go yoke-less through life). That's not what he does. In the same way, (and for the same reasons), he doesn't want us to go through life without law.

My friends, (on this Independence Day weekend), a life without law is chaotic. A life that's totally free is as far from freedom as you'll ever get. Don't be misled. Don't get caught up in the thinking that's so popular (these days) that our individual rights are more important than our corporate good. (It's not true.)

I (personally) think it's one of the most destructive ideas circulating today, this whole idea that what's happening in this life (the role of government and our laws); that it's all about protecting me, and my rights, and

my freedom, and what I want and what I need in my life.” (It’s all there for me.) It’s not true. It’s there for you, but only as it serves our nation (as a whole), only as it plays itself out for the common good.

In our text today, Jesus doesn’t come along to take away our yoke. But he does give us a yoke that is light (one that’s manageable), and one that’s “well-fitted” for who we are.

Anyone remember Church history? Remember St. Augustine? Saint Augustine had a shaky start to his life, especially in his relationship with God. As a young man, fathering a child out of wedlock, living (almost) and entirely for himself, his life was as reckless and carefree and (at times) as wild as you’d find. That’s what he was doing with his life...until he met Jesus, until Christ caught up to him and he became a believer.

After his conversion, Augustine wrote that “True freedom means to be free, not to do (in life) what we want to do in life, but rather to be in life what God has created and wants us to be.”

In closing today, growing weary in life can be the consequence of many things. The burdens of this life can (and do) take many shapes and forms. There are all kinds of things (in this life) that can cause us to worry and become weighed down.

But there’s only one real and lasting answer to the weights and the burdens and the weariness we face. And it comes (to us) not in the form of a pill (we can take), and not in the form of a plan (we can follow), but in a God who became a person (we can trust), who has promised to walk with us in life and (help us carry) whatever weights and burdens and weariness we have.

Give your burdens to Jesus and let him carry them. That’s “True Freedom”, given and promised to us in Christ. Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus, we come today, laying our burdens at your feet and trusting in your promise to help us carry them in life. We thank you for the yoke you have to give and for the way in which our burdens and weights can become light and manageable in you. Lord, help us to trust; help us to believe; help us to let go of the things that are weighing us down and give them to you. In your name we pray. Amen.