

“In dependence”

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – July 6, 2020

N. Farnham & St. John’s Episcopal Churches = The Rev. Torrence Harman

Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

This morning it is the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, the 5th day of July, the day after the 4th. Here is what is in front of us on this Sunday:

- Pentecost, the day when Christians celebrate getting all fired up for discipleship along the new Way that Christ offered and then, as disciples to try and live forward into that new Way.
- The 4th of July, a day to celebrate our independence as a nation from under the yoke of domination by the “old world” from which those birthing this nation, this “new world” had come.
- The issue of “yoking, – a timely word that jumps out at us from our Gospel passage this morning. because it confronts us with the issues of yoked or unyoked, independent or dependent – a provocative topic at any time but maybe especially so now, like it was in Jesus’ time.

The birth of our nation was the result of people weary and heavy laden, desiring freedom from oppressive systems– economic, religious, governmental, societal. And so, fired up they harnessed that energy into action and headed towards a distant horizon and a “new world.” It is interesting that the founding of this “new world” came after exhausting conflict among all the factions at war with each other for dominance and control in the “old world.” The idea that to form something new we must turn our eyes towards larger horizons, risk moving forward towards them to discover larger life is also provocative.

Pentecost and Independence Day have this in common. They are times to get all fired up, high energy times, creative expression, big bang times that light up people. But then the big question faces us. How to live with that fired up, freed up energy. How to harness it, towards what end and guided by what?

Interesting pair of New Testament passages today. Our old friend Paul speaking once again in his letter to those in the Church in Rome and our companion along the Way into truth and life, Jesus speaking in the Gospel of Matthew. Both I believe are talking about freedom, energy, how to use our freedom, harnessing it for positive ways to live into it. But, of course there’s that pesky little word “yoke” which requires our attention.

If there was any fired up, high spirited character, freed from old ways, freed from what had dominated his life before his conversion to a new Way of life, it is Paul. On the road to Damascus, in effect, Christ lifted off of Paul’s shoulders, heart, mind and spirit the yoke that was shackling his soul – old ways of what he names “sin”- his old ways of being at odds with his God and his “neighbors” and even his true self. It was a heavy, devastating burden. Paul finally

crashed to his knees when Christ called him out on his old way of life. Recognizing the burden he was carrying and desperately needing release, Paul sought a conversion of his life as he bowed to and accepted Divine authority in his life, seeking freedom in doing so. Paradoxically, this happened by his becoming yoked to something new: Divine love.

We see a distraught Paul in his letter today. He is feeling old ties binding him again, like tendrils of a vine which if allowed to continue growing will destroy him. He is realizing that even as he has found new life, there are still parts of himself trying to pull him back – negative aspects trying to enslave, bind him again. He knows the way he wants to go, what is his to do, how he is to live, move and interact with life, his energy and life harnessed by the Divine. But finds himself still bound to things he thought he had been saved from. He speaks of war – a war within himself. Describing implicitly a contest over his soul. We hear it in his voice, maybe anger but mostly a sense of being weary, heavy laden, not knowing how to extricate himself from what is at war with his “members.” Evil (his word), pulling at him, luring him backwards. In a way his prayer seems to be “Help! Save, me, Lord, yet again.” Interesting thought, how sometimes we need to be saved, not from something outside of ourselves, but from something within our own self.

“Come unto me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Jesus calling when we so desperately need him, when we need help greater than we can provide ourselves. Come, come. There is just something inside of us that really wants to respond. That whispers of freedom, of release from some sort of bondage that has become uncomfortable, that doesn't feel right. But then don't we pause over the word he uses for a relationship with what is Divine and good. “Yoke.”

Jesus was a carpenter from Nazareth. Carpenters were sought out to craft yokes and agricultural tools. The yokes worn by animals used to plow the fields, or turn the gristmills for grain, olives presses, even to lift water from deep wells. Yokes, single or double, were used to harness the energy those yoked could bring to any task - tasks essential and absolutely critical to the life and health of the community. A single yoke harnessed the energy of one animal, whether a small one with a lighter task needing only one creature or a large animal whose strength could be channeled to a larger task. A double yoke harnessed the energy of two, helping them work together towards one outcome, one goal. A single yoke harnessing the power of one working independently (yet yoked). A double yoke harnessing the power interdependently for a common purpose. The reality, of course, is that a yoke, for an individual or combination of individuals did deny freedom of movement in order to achieve a certain purpose for a larger whole.

A yoke offers an amazing opportunity to make things happen. Jesus knew that; he made them. He knew that the image of “yoke” would be familiar to the folks with whom he was talking. They were themselves under a yoke. But it was crushing the life out of them. Jesus offered a

yoke with a different purpose. It all depends on whose yoke we wear, doesn't it? Or, at least, isn't that the message Jesus is trying to offer? Isn't that the dilemma Paul has found himself in, whose yoke is he wearing, yet again, one that is interfering with the better Way. And the reality that he can't cast away what is old by himself but needs Divine help.

And so we turn to the idea of an Independence Day. Freedom is certainly a huge theme in the world around us as a nation this Independence Day. Most of our news is focused on the loss of freedom imposed by a physical health virus (COVID-19) or the loss of freedom imposed by a societal and systemic virus named racism. There is a basic human desire to be free, to be independent. Paradoxically, there is a basic human need to be interdependent, to be in relationship with others.

While "yoke" is a word with both a bright and a shadow side, so it is with the word independence. How I see them play together today given our passages and life dissembling around us is when we simply put a space between "in" and "dependence." And consider how they may be yoked in a way that guides the energy we find at a fired-up Pentecostal, 4th of July kind of time.

Is independence yoked by evil purpose - like what concerns Paul in his self-searching conversation with himself shared with the Romans? Or, is independence yoked to positive healthy life-giving purposes designed to accomplish a Divine goal of love, peace, abundance? I guess it boils down to recognizing that independence, theologically and realistically depends on the answer to the question: "In/on what do I depend for life?"

I think of those coming to the new world seeking freedom, seeking independence and yet, first things, first, dropping to their knees on new soil giving thanks to God, knowing that their independence was the gift of grace for the passage through and dependence on the Divine giver of courage and grace to those who had humbled their spirits to depend on the Divine providence.

As we celebrate Independence Day, let us pause, take stock of where we are at this point in time, what we have depended on in the past, what we are depending on now, what is burdening and lies heavy on our life together – all of us – as a community and a nation. What is trying to harness our energies and to what purpose. To what do we owe our allegiance. To what do we look to for authority in our lives. To what are we yoked. It what we are yoked to holding us back, holding us hostage. Are we ready for a lighter more generous yoke, one that lifts our weariness and helps us walk the path towards a new horizon, a way of being world – together with liberty and justice and abundance for ALL. Are we hearing the Divine calling us to come, come – take on the yoke of love and move towards grace. Questions to ponder. How will we answer?