

The Reverend Dr. Sandy Selby

The Yoke of Freedom

A reading from the gospel according to Matthew, the 11th chapter:
²⁵*At that time Jesus said [to the crowd], “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. ²⁸“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*

If, like Rip van Winkle, you went to sleep twenty years ago, or even six months ago, and awakened this weekend, you would wonder what on earth is going on in this country, on Independence Day! In many places, 4th of July fireworks were cancelled altogether; at others, they were attended by large crowds. Bars were open in several states, closed in others. In some public places, people were standing six feet apart, wearing masks. In others, they were standing closely together, unmasked, shouting and singing. What’s going on here, Rip van Winkle asks?

Six months into the reality of COVID-19 we have become accustomed, if not numbed, to the confusion and chaos arising from inconsistent messages and policies to address our public health crisis, and from the underlying mystery about the workings of the virus, itself. Some respond to this uncertainty by doubling down on safety precautions in the interest of public health; others go about their daily lives as if the coronavirus doesn’t exist, fiercely claiming their constitutional right to do so.

What we see on this 4th of July weekend, with bars mobbed, or closed, and with fireworks cancelled, or watched by thousands bunched together, is that in 2020 we are living out the question that our nation’s Founders were debating nearly 250 years ago: What does it mean to be free? It’s a question that is at the heart of our life together as Americans, and as Christians, as we experience the dual viruses of COVID-19 and racism.

In a reflection on Christian freedom published just after the Bicentennial in 1976, Welton Gaddy, the former president of the Interfaith Alliance writes, “The foundation of human freedom is constructed from a redemptive relationship with

God and a responsible relationship with other persons.”¹ The redemptive relationship with God is woven through Scripture. In the Old Testament, stories of the Exodus from Egypt and the return from exile in Babylon depict the human tendency to hold others in bondage, and God’s initiative to lead God’s people to liberation. In the gospels, Jesus ushers in a new “exodus” from the bondage and oppression of first-century Palestine under Roman rule, to the freedom of the Reign of God that brings justice, peace, and well being for all.

Luke tells us that at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus described his mission in this way: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk 4:18-19). The ministry of Jesus is about freedom. He liberates countless individuals from blindness, illness, and demons. And he calls those who would follow him, in his time and in ours, to freedom from the bondage of sin, in particular, the sins of idolatry and self-absorption. Welton Gaddy writes, “The crucial issue in freedom is not *whether* a person is bound but *to what or to whom* a person is bound...The *only* way for anyone truly to be free in this world is for life to be bound to the *only One* who has overcome the world!...Persons are most free when committed to live as the children of God.”²

Today’s lesson from Matthew’s gospel tells us how we can be bound to Christ, in a yoke of freedom. Having commissioned his disciples to join in his ministry of liberation, Jesus describes to the crowds who are following him the oppression under which the people of Palestine live, and the ways in which he and John the Baptist have been misunderstood and rejected. Then he says a prayer of thanksgiving that the “infants” who are seen by the authorities as foolish and ignorant are open to seeing the living presence of God that is being revealed through Jesus. The pride of those the world calls “wise” blinds them to God’s truth that is plainly seen by those who are humble, open-minded, and open-hearted.

Jesus then gives the “infants” an invitation: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28). These words of comfort are often read at funerals, or at other times when we are weighed down by life’s struggles and sorrows. Sometimes these words of comfort are exactly what we need to hear. Maybe that’s true for you, today.

But, Jesus says, the journey doesn’t stop there. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for

¹ C. Welton Gaddy, “A Christian Understanding of Human Freedom,” *Review & Expositor* Vol 73:3, 8/1/76, 294.

² Gaddy, 295.

your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” In Hebrew Scripture and in rabbinic teaching, the “yoke” was a common metaphor for the difficult but joyous task of obedience to Torah, the Law. But in Jesus’ day, the “yoke” of the Law had become oppressive. Describing the religious authorities, the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus says later in Matthew’s gospel, “they tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them” (Mt 23:4). Here, Jesus is saying, “Don’t take up their yoke of oppression, don’t rely on the wisdom or ways of this world. Take up my yoke of freedom. Learn what I can teach you about life in the Reign of God, where gentleness and humility rule. Here you’ll find rest not just for your body, but for your soul. When you take up my yoke, which I bear along with you, my yoke isn’t oppressive. It’s ‘easy’ (a better translation is that my yoke is ‘kind’, or ‘good’). Because I walk alongside you, sharing your burden, my burden is light.” When we take on the yoke of Jesus, we take on the yoke of freedom.

Pope Francis, then named Jorge Bergoglio, wrote about the yoke of freedom in an article published in 1968, the year before his ordination to the priesthood. Bergoglio said that the “irony of freedom” is that we can only be free from focus on self by allowing ourselves to be overcome by God. While God respects human freedom, God nonetheless constantly calls us to seek God’s love and goodness. There’s a push-pull here. We resist giving ourselves up to God “because of the human illusion that what we have, we have earned; and because what we think we deserve to keep, we fear to lose. Yet all we are and have is pure gift, to which the only reasonable response must be a joyful surrender in gratitude, expressed in service to others, in obedience to the source of our good.”³ This is the irony of Christian freedom, freedom that comes because we are yoked to Jesus, with the surrender to service that requires, a freedom that comes to us through pure grace.

With that freedom that flows from a redemptive relationship with God comes a responsibility for relationship with others, a relationship based in gentleness and humility. Our nation’s celebration of Independence Day comes with enduring symbols, among them the Statue of Liberty. On a plaque at the foot of that statue is engraved the words of the poem “New Colossus” written by Emma Lazarus in 1883, and placed there twenty years later:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

³Austen Ivereigh, *Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis and His Struggle to Convert the Catholic Church* (New York: Henry Holt, 2019), 46.

Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

Well, in recent years that golden door of welcome to immigrants and refugees mostly has been slammed shut! Yet, the long arc of biblical witness calls us to welcome the stranger. The Roman Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen famously said, “Just as we have a Statue of Liberty on the East Coast to remind us of our privileges, so we should have a Statue of Responsibility on the West Coast to remind us of our accompanying responsibilities, as Christians.”

What we see happening around us today with those fellow citizens who violate public health orders as their “constitutional right” is the exercise of freedom as an end in itself, a boundary-less, self-focused freedom that becomes a form of tyranny when it takes no responsibility, and shows no respect, for the freedom and well being of others. In contrast to that self-focused notion of freedom, Christian freedom is *always* a means to a greater end beyond the self, an end that looks to the flourishing of all creation in the Reign of God, fulfilled in love, justice, well being, and peace for all of God’s creatures.

The apostle Paul wrote in Galatians, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1). Here, Paul refers to the slavery that comes from the bondage of sin, in particular the sins of idolatry and self-absorption.

But there is another yoke of slavery, a yoke that was placed on the African people who first were brought to this land as slaves 401 years ago. The vestige of that yoke of slavery remains, today, in the structural and systemic racism that is manifest in inequality for people of color in education, employment, housing, health care, criminal justice, and in the disproportionate incidence of COVID-19 in that population. It is our work, as Christians, to dismantle those structures and systems that perpetuate racism, and to do the work of the heart to which God calls us: to see each person as a child of God, to embrace our responsibility for the common good, to love our neighbor as ourselves. This work of eradicating the virus of racism is the fruit of Christian freedom, liberating both the oppressed, and we the oppressors who have been privileged by the structures of racism, so that we can live into our true identities as children created in the image of God.

As to COVID-19, there, too, we claim and embody our Christian freedom by serving God and neighbor. The paradox of the coronavirus is that while we have learned that the deep, global interconnection of humanity can be pernicious and deadly, we have also learned that our deep interconnection can be life-giving. When we live with a commitment to being responsible for the well being of others,

following public health practices and caring for one another, and eliminating the inequities that make people of color most vulnerable to this virus, we demonstrate how to live together in responsible relationship, working for the common good in the Reign of God.

On this Independence Day, Jesus invites us to take on his yoke of freedom—a yoke of goodness and lovingkindness that Jesus bears with us. The burden is light, and life-giving. People of God, let's take it on!

Amen.