

7-5-26 sermon  
Matthew 11.25-30

Happy birthday America! I imagine most of us celebrated the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of these United States yesterday. Some of us might still be feeling the after-effects of our celebration. You only meant to have one burger, but the host pressed another on you, and that was on top of the three hotdogs you'd already enjoyed. So, perhaps this morning you're feeling a little uncomfortable in your body. Or, maybe, you'd only planned on having a couple of beers. But then someone pulled out the bottle of bourbon they'd saved for a special occasion, and that first glass went down so smoothly, and everyone was having such a good time, so you had another. And another. And those two beers became something else entirely. Perhaps that's why you're joining us from your sofa this morning! Or maybe you got home after the party and decided to catch the next episode of that new show you just started. Just one episode before turning in for the night. But your streaming service so very thoughtfully starts that 5-second countdown to the next episode, and you decided that one more wouldn't hurt. And then you found yourself at the end of the season, a bit delirious and a bit dehydrated.

Does that sound familiar at all?

I imagine for some of us it might. And not just on the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of these United States. But on any given day, perhaps. I mean, I always intend to only have *one* dessert at the summer potluck, but then a certain someone arrives with banana pudding *after* I've already taken a piece of pie and... Or, perhaps, you've taken out membership at a local gym and fully intend to address the impact a sedentary life is having on your health, but haven't actually made it there quite yet.

Most of us know what it means to make a decision to either cut down on something that's having a negative impact on our lives, or to add something beneficial to our lives. Determinations made with the best intentions, but intentions that we somehow never quite seem able to maintain in practice:

"I'm going to do all my homework *before* I play that video game I've almost completed."

"I'm going to start working on that paper a week before it's due, rather than the night before."

"I'm going to finalize the curriculum for that new class I'm teaching in the fall at the *beginning* of the summer."

"I'm going to cancel that streaming subscription so it's not such a distraction."

"I'm going to stop going online late at night."

"I'm going to do the things that I know will be good for me."

"I'm going to *stop* doing the things that I know *aren't* good for me."

And we mean it.

We make a plan. We may even tell someone else – ask for some accountability. And yet we keep doing those things we truly want to stop doing. And we *don't* do the things we say we want to do. If anything came to mind in your own life as I've been speaking, then know this. You are not alone. You're in good company. And not just the people sitting around you here. Or next to you on the sofa at home.

A reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 7, beginning at verse 15. I'm reading from the Living Bible.

Romans 7.15-25

I grew up reading the King James version of the Bible, and listening to "Gospel preachers" every Sunday night. I knew all about sin and hell, and the specific sins that teenagers loved of which we needed to repent. And I believed it all. Earnestly. And was terrified most of the time. Because I was more than familiar with several of the sins they listed. Then one day, my Sunday School teacher, Roy Murton, handed me a copy of the Living Bible in which he had placed a bookmark. In today's passage. I read it, and for the first time in my life, I felt seen by the bible, and not judged. And it was the apostle *Paul* who wrote those words! To hear my own experience articulated by the person who had written so many of the words that those Gospel preachers loved to quote *at us* was liberating.

"I don't understand myself at all..."

"Me neither Paul!"

"When I want to do good, I don't; and when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway."

"I know, right?"

Reading those words gave me hope that my inability to be the person I truly wanted to be didn't have to be the sub-title of my autobiography. Over time, I would become able – with Paul – to say, "Who will free me from the power of sin? Thank God. It has been done by Jesus Christ our Lord. He has set me free." Now, I'm not saying that eating two desserts is a sin. Nor that binge-watching Netflix is. But if we do find ourselves powerless to change certain habits when we decide they're not good for us, then we find ourselves in the same place Paul articulates here. Perhaps experiencing that same sense of powerlessness, or even defeat.

Which leads me back to the Gospel passage assigned in the Lectionary for today"

"Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.  
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."

What image comes to mind when you hear those words?

What does it look like for you to come to Jesus when you're feeling weary, and heavy-laden? For many if not most of us, it probably simply means praying, talking to Jesus about those things. Telling him what's weighing us down, and asking him to sustain us through it. And for some – if not many of us – simply bringing those things to Jesus in prayer is enough to lift a great deal of the emotional and psychological weight we're carrying. Which is wonderful. But the image that would have come to the disciples, to whom Jesus is talking, would have been quite different than that. This is one of the ways rabbis spoke about their disciples: if you wanted to learn *from* them, you had to be “yoked” to them. Just as oxen are yoked together in order to walk in the same direction, rabbis and disciples were yoked together. Jesus says, “my teaching is easy, and my burden is light.” Now, given that immediately following this, Jesus critiques the pharisees for the burdens they lay on people in their own teaching, I think Jesus is saying, “Take *my* yoke upon you – learn from *me*, for my yoke is easier to bear than that of the pharisees.” To which I confess I want to say, “Have you even *read* your sermon on the mount? Not exactly *easy* to do all that!” But I don't think that's what Jesus is getting at.

The reality was, if the people followed the teaching of the pharisees perfectly, their lives would be no different than they currently were. 90% of them would still be barely making it, one injury, or illness, or failed crop away from disaster. Jesus had said to the pharisees, “You lay burdens on people too heavy to bear, and won't lift a finger to help them.” But the Way of Jesus – though hardly easy to follow – would change *everything* about their lives. Individually *and* collectively. If they took the yoke of Jesus on themselves, and walked his Way, then everyone would flourish – there would be no poor among them – because the wealthy among them would take responsibility for the poor.

If you find yourself feeling weary, and heavy-laden this morning, if, like Paul, you find yourself saying, “I just don't understand myself...” Or, if you're simply tired because you're trying to do the right thing – and you *do* – and it doesn't seem to be making a scrap of difference, then the invitation is to come to Jesus, to take his yoke upon you, and find rest for your souls. Rest from the guilt and shame and regret that you might feel.

Rest from the constant struggle and failure to be the person you want to be.

Rest from the heavy burdens that others lay on you that don't make your life better

Rest from the exhaustion that comes from trying to lead by example, and finding no one seems to want to follow you into a future where more of us can flourish.

In just a few minutes we'll be invited to do just that. To come to Jesus – at his table. To receive a small piece of bread and a sip of juice and be reminded – as Paul wrote – that we have been freed from the bondage of sin. We have been set free. As we eat the bread, and drink

from the cup, may we find rest for our souls and a taste of the life that comes from walking the Way of Jesus.

And not just as individuals. But as a nation. Because, for all our talk of freedom and liberty this weekend, on this 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of these United States there is still much work to be done if we are to experience “one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” There are those trying to chisel away the words of Emma Lazarus: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” If we listen closely, we can almost hear America say,

“I don’t understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I can’t.”

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. Yet whenever I start acting like I believe that, somehow I end up doing the opposite. I seem to keep yoking myself to ideologies and political platforms that if my people were to follow them perfectly, would make no difference in the lives of those whose lives need to change the most. It might even make their lives worse.”

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me,’ says Jesus. Both to us, and to America. “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. And if you’ll walk in my Way, you will find the rest – and the liberty – that you long for.”

May it be so.