

It is somewhat ironic that on this weekend when we have been celebrating the 250th anniversary of our nation, and remembering the freedoms that we associate with our independence such as the freedom to be self-directed, to not have a government dictating our lives, the freedom to pursue happiness, to speak out when we feel it is appropriate and so on, that we encounter Paul in his letter to the Romans. Because Paul has a very different understanding of freedom from us modern, and in our case, Americans. We see freedom as being unencumbered by anything, to be decoupled from whatever might hold us back. For us, freedom is a fierce independence employed along side an equally fierce individuality. We are ships sailing on a calm ocean with a steady following wind. But that is not how Paul sees the condition of the human being. There is no strict autonomy. For Paul, we are slaves to something. We reading this in his letter to the Romans: one is either a slave to sin, or a slave to righteousness through salvation in Jesus Christ. Even in our reading today we see Paul struggling with the trappings of sin through his flesh, being saved only through Jesus and the law of God. So for Paul there is not independent third way, there is only enslavement. The question is, to which to we offer our services: sin or righteousness?

Jesus is addressing this same question in our gospel today: Do you choose to follow God? At this point in Matthew's gospel, John is imprisoned and sends his disciples to question Jesus as to whether or not he truly is the Messiah. Jesus responds that yes, Jesus has been fulfilling Messianic expectations. But turning to the crowds he asks them, "what did you go out in the wilderness to see?" Jesus is affirming John's role in God's plan, but he is questioning the expectations of the crowd, and the unwillingness of "this generation" to see God at work. And no matter how God's messengers appear, they are rebuked: John came "neither eating nor drinking" that is John was an aesthetic...he put away comforts as part of his witness. And yet, people thought him crazy. Jesus, the Son of Man, as he refers to himself, comes eating and drinking and still people see him as a "glutton and a drunkard" who hangs around disreputable people. Either way, humanity rejects them both. This is what Jesus is referring to when he uses the analogy of children playing in the marketplaces: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' No matter how God approaches, the people will not meet God there.

And yet, there remains this yearning for and a recognition that humanity is in need of salvation. Jesus ends this latest teaching saying: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.” The notion of being yoked, is what you think it is: that cross piece of wood that connects oxen together usually for the work of plowing fields. The Merriam-Webster also refers to it as servitude or bondage. It is the opposite of what we think of as freedom for it IS being bound to something. But there was also the understanding that one would take on the “yoke of the Torah”¹ or would bind themselves to the Law through obedience and discipline. That is what Jesus is talking about here, that people would come to him and follow him and in return they would find rest rather than an impossible burden. That this being bound to Jesus would be unlike the burdens they carried already, burdens they had nowhere to put down. But in Jesus they would, and would be able to take up something lifegiving.

And this is where this other figure slips quietly into the text but who has actually been a rather formidable figure in scripture: Wisdom. Wisdom is understood in the Hebrew scriptures as being a preexistent figure, created by or proceeding from God.² Wisdom brings people to God, makes them “friends of God”³, and through Wisdom people walk faithfully with God. And Wisdom is also feminine. Some of you have asked why I refer to the Holy Spirit in the feminine. Well, in Greek the word for Spirit is feminine, and it is also because of the Spirit’s association with Wisdom that I use feminine language to describe her. But also, Jesus in our text today is identifying with Wisdom. For the wisdom of God is not like the wisdom of the world. It rejects the status quo, raising up the least to be greatest, seeing the cross as the way to life, seeing giving up everything to gain the Kingdom. Wisdom is a powerful force and those who follow her are those who chose to put on the yoke of Christ, who exchange enslavement to sin for enslavement to righteousness. It is those who welcome Wisdom are able to see the hand of God at work, who can dance when they hear the music of God playing. “To fear the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; she is created with the faithful in the womb. She made among human beings an eternal foundation and among their descendants she will abide faithfully...She rained down knowledge

¹ Jewish Annotated New Testament. Pg. 32.

² Ibid. Pg. 404.

³ Wisdom 7:27

and discerning comprehension, and she heightened the glory of those who held her fast.”⁴ This is the same Wisdom that Jesus is referring to and identifying with in our text today. She is beautiful. And yes, she is vindicated by her deeds because those deeds will bring rest to a weary world.

So in our walk of faith, we are not trying to escape and go our own way, we are not trying to make a way we walk alone, we are not seeking to be free in in any real sense. We want to be captured, held fast, and abide within God in whom is true freedom, but a freedom unlike the freedom of the world. In taking on the discipline, the yoke of Christ, we give up our wandering and return to the place where we find life in all of its fullness. The way of the cross is hard, yes it is, but it is a life where we find God, God who walks with us no matter where we may find ourselves. It is a life where the meaninglessness and despair of the world can be exchanged for hope and purpose. It is a life where we can be friends with the divine which is such a powerful image...to be friends with God. In the language we read around Wisdom, there is real delight. I think Jesus wishes to bring this to a bone tired people. Unlike the earthly rulers who pile on more and more, the God of the Kingdom of Heaven lifts the burdens from his people, and in Christ carries those burdens for them. When we allow ourselves to be yoked to Christ we will find that we are not alone in the world, but befriended by the divine who will, again and again, give everything to bring us back. Amen.

⁴ Sirach