

THE “REST” OF THE STORY
Romans and Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30
July 5, 2020
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

Thanks be to God for the kind of freedom that, through the grace of our Lord, we can celebrate for a lifetime, and not just a day. Even so, Happy “after” Independence Day! The 4th of July is not part of a liturgical season like Advent or Easter, but both Paul’s letter to the Romans and the Matthew text dovetail with the theme of freedom. Matthew reminds us that God has been forever calling out to us to partner in this gift called life, in spite of the truth that humans keep rejecting the invitation. For instance, the invitation to repentance from the locust-eating, wiry-haired, wild-eyed John the Baptist was a bit stern, if not frightening to some. That kind of message did not seem to fly with many. On the other hand, Jesus’ invitation was a joyous one of reconciliation and yet, that did not work for the masses either.

Our Triune God asks, “What do you want? We played a flute for you and you would not dance; we have cried for you, and you have not felt our pain.” Knowing how unique and different we are, it stands to reason that there can be different approaches to invitations, but, the end result is the same. Both are invitations. God, through those who speak for God, are inviting us into right relationship with the Holy. A relationship born out of the freedom of choice, not coerced or forced.

This pandemic has given us more than enough opportunities to discover or re-discover that freedom is both a gift and a responsibility. Choose as we will; the consequences are ours. The bottom-line truth about freedom: with all its choices, being free can also be a burden.

I thought the example I am able to share was a bit on the silly side, and it may be. But, over the course of the last few weeks, in talking with family and friends, it seems to be a hot topic of conversation with them also. It used to be after a day’s work away from home, Gary and I would come home, both hungry, neither of us wanting to cook. The pre-pandemic go-to was this, “Let’s go out to eat!” Same conversation now, just with different language. Tired and hungry, not wanting to cook, “Where can we pick up something to eat in Combine, America?” That is when the problem with freedom starts.

I do not know, what sounds good to you? What sounds good to you? How about KFC? Nope, I am not feeling it tonight. OK, what about Tex-Mex; we are always up for that? That sounds too heavy this late at night. What about a salad? I do not have the energy to decide whether I want mushrooms or carrots or olives; decisions make my brain hurt!” Among all of the other things that are going on in our world and in our heads, we are embarrassed that we have such an overabundance of food choices, when so many do not! More often than not, we settle for cereal!

Silly example? Sure, maybe even a sad one given the fact that we have the freedom to choose from such a wild and bountiful variety of choices. But it demonstrates, on a small scale, that sometimes freedom and choices are hard. Sometimes we are so overwhelmed by life’s minor choices that we make no critical decisions about the bigger ways we will choose to live our lives. Most days it is easier to decide what will we wear, eat, or where we will go than it is to decide

what kind of person we are or want to be. Sometimes the day to day choices we make just to keep our heads above water are exhausting. So, why do we somehow keep missing this invitation from God into a rest-filled relationship:

“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.”

Jesus says, “Hey, feeling overwhelmed and overworked? Come over here and I will slip a yoke around your shoulders, you know like the oxen wear as they trudge through the fields pulling a great weight?

A weight around the neck? Sounds good, Jesus! Sign me up for that. I am already feeling overwhelmed, so adding to my burdens is just what I need.

But, in the Jewish scriptures, a yoke is the symbol for fulfilling the law, a means for living by the wisdom of the God. Good work, yes, but work nonetheless. I can understand why the people of the past, and we, are so reluctant to join the dance, to accept the invitation. It is about full, complete commitment.

So, this yoke-wearing business does not sound like freedom on this July 4th weekend! But this sense of personal weightiness is not the end of the story. Enter songwriter Bob Dylan to help flesh out the rest of the story with his song titled, “Gotta Serve Somebody.” It goes like this and, no I will not be strumming or singing:

*You may be an ambassador to England or France.
You may like to gamble or you may like to dance.
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world.
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord.
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

Dylan fan or not, these lyrics remind us that freedom is about choices. Putting on the yoke of Jesus has implications on how we choose to live life. Freedom is not merely “freedom from”, but “freedom to” as well. There is no earthly freedom that will remove all that binds us. We will be bound by the relationships. Bound by jobs. Bound by each road we journey down. Bound by our bodies or minds. We have the freedom to choose many of the ways we are bound, but we are bound nonetheless.

Each of us will be bound to certain ways, things, people, but our freedom comes in choosing which yoke we wear. But Jesus is inviting us to put on a yoke that will help us navigate the bounds placed on us in this human existence. We can become bound to yokes that damage us... addictions, dysfunctional relationships, jobs that demean us. Yet, even yokes that are heavy can be meaningful. Our lives yoked together with our Lord still creates that bond of responsibility, but the connections are lightened because they are bound together in relationships of mutual trust and support, joined together by a job that rewards and fulfills us. We are yoked together for the

purpose of living in and showing others what it means to live in grace-filled freedom with Jesus as Lord.

It may be a stretch when Jesus says, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” He has just called his followers to take up their crosses, and that does not sound easy and light, especially when cross-carrying comes in so many forms. Loving our neighbor is not always easy and light. Being the church together is not always easy and light. No matter how much we love Jesus, living out our faith in the world can be a grind at times.

But here is where we find the **REST** of the story, and by that I do not mean an ending. I mean, this is where we can take in a deep breath, let the burdens go even if for only a moment. Be in rest as in restoration.

Jesus issued that paradoxical invitation because he knew that we need to learn and be reminded on a regular basis that when we choose to put on a yoke of meaningful purpose, a yoke of faithfulness, a yoke that strives to partner us with God, we discover our true selves. We discover who God created us to be and in that we find ourselves being rest-full instead of rest-less. We find the ultimate freedom of recognizing who we are and what our purpose is in this world. So now, an invitation to you: Please close your eyes if you wish and imagine with me.

You are restless, troubled, and worried. What is on your mind and heart?

Imagine now walking toward a place that brings you peace, a place where you can think, process. A place where you can be still. Where are you walking?

Along the way you meet a stranger, and strangely enough, you feel a connection, as if you know this person. This person comes along with you as you walk toward that place of peace. Along the way you visit. You feel yourself a bit lighter, more at peace. Something inside you stirs and you realize that you could keep on going, looking for that solitary place of peace, and yet, you realize the peace is already in you, long before you reach “that place.” The conversation with this newfound friend has slowed your breath, calmed your spirit.

Instead, you invite the stranger back to your house. Dinner was already in the oven, with just a few left to prepare, and you know you will enjoy the company.

At home, the guest volunteers to work alongside you, finishing up the meal. Then sitting down, he asks to bless the meal and the new friendship. Eyes closed. Heads bowed. Thanksgiving is offered. Amen is uttered.

You open your eyes. Your guest is nowhere in sight. But on the table is a wrapped gift box. You unwrap it. The gift inside is exactly what you need to calm your restlessness, to settle your troubled heart, to weep the worry out of your head. What is that gift for you? It was given to you to wipe away some of the weariness; to help hold your heavy burden, to restore you with rest.

Please prayer with me. This, and every day, God, may we find in your gifts to us, the REST we need as we seek to choose your ways of freedom that remind us and others of your great love story in Jesus, who helps carry our burdens as we in turn helps others bear their loads. Amen.