

# Independence Day and the Yoke of Christ

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July 5, 2020. On this Independence Day weekend we think about what independence means. It is not passive. It requires investment and sacrifice. And the work continues, even within the church.

Readings: [Zechariah 9:9-12](#), [Romans 7:15-25a](#), [Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30](#)

\*\*\* Transcript \*\*\*

Yesterday was the 4th of July, Independence Day. It's kind hard for me to think about that phrase — Independence Day — without an image of the silver screen movie "[Independence Day](#)," with Will Smith rushing off to save the planet from invading alien forces. I was taught to be independent, as so many of us have been. I got to thinking about what independence means. So I looked it up and it says, "Be self-sufficient. Take care of myself." Merriam-Webster says, "Self-dependence, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, self-support." A lot of "selves." And in so many ways, independence has always seemed to be focused on separating, in one way or another — whether it be humans from aliens like in the movie; or people in slavery from those enslaving them; not being part of a political party, being independent politically; or even children growing independent from their parents.

The War of Independence, which we commemorate on this July 4th, involved 8 years of struggle to define the right to self-govern — another self — free from Britain's rule. The Civil War of the 1860s, a battle between those claiming the right to hold people as slaves versus those claiming the right of the enslaved people to be free, divided the southern states from the northern, Republicans from Democrats, parents and siblings from one another.

One thing is for sure: freedom is not a passive thing — it requires investment, and sacrifice. Jesus and Paul, in today's readings, both talk about struggle, about confusion, in our human experience. Freedom has always come with a cost. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, 100 years after black people had been granted freedom, was met with horrifyingly violent resistance. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his 1963 letter from the Birmingham jail that "freedom is never given voluntarily by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." You must demand it, for it will not be given freely. And this has always been true, through the ages, from the story of Moses and Israelites, to today. In the LGBTQIA+ liberation movement 50 years ago, in 1969, transwomen of color did just that, leading the way as they fought for their freedom from police brutality, and the freedom to live as themselves, without fear.

And the work of liberation, of independence, has continued, even within the church. In 1970, 50 years ago, the first woman was ordained in the Lutheran Church of America — the LCA, one of our predecessor bodies — after decades of working for this change. In 1990, the first openly gay clergy were ordained in the ELCA, prior to it actually being allowed. And not only did those ordained receive sanction, but so did the congregations that had the courage to call them. They were all expelled from the ELCA. And in the 19 years that followed, many people went through candidacy "extraordinarily," and congregations called them against the direction of their Synods. And finally in 2009 the Churchwide Assembly made the decision to allow the Ordination of LGBTQIA candidates! And the decision to come back into the ELCA, after all that had happened, was not easy for those that had been expelled — for the pastors or for their congregations.

These journeys — for women, for black people, for LGBTQIA folks — continue. Paul describes in

clear terms in his letter to the Romans the ongoing struggle he experienced, as he sought what was right, where the Spirit was leading, over what was easy. Jesus in Matthew talks to his disciples about how difficult it can be, in the chaos of this world, to see truth from lie, to know God's will when there is so much that distracts us. Liberation, freedom, is and always has been not the work of a moment, but of a movement.

Even in our church today we struggle to evolve. Women continue to face considerable challenges in ministry — seminary enrollment is about 50% men and women, but rostered leadership is only about 30% women, and people who identify as non-binary or gender fluid are often not seen at all. Black people continue to face discrimination, poverty, incarceration, at highly disproportionate rates, as the structures of racism — and overt white supremacy — are alive and well, at all levels. We know, in this time, that black people are literally dying, even today. LGBTQIA people have gained the right to be married, but still face daunting challenges, in the world as well as in the church.

So, as we come together on this Independence Day weekend, what does the gospel have for us today? Because I believe it is always speaking to us. For one thing, freedom doesn't mean what we often think it means — the ability to determine our own course, without concern for others, all those "selves" we talked about earlier. In Zechariah, the king is coming not for individuals, but for the people, together. The people, exiled though they may be, are still God's people. And God is still their God. And Jesus calls us, all of us, to bring our burdens to him, telling us that his yoke is easy. Those of us who have not farmed may not think about yokes often. When Jesus calls us to him, he is calling us not to the freedom of independence, of standing alone, or free completely of burdens, but to the freedom of interdependence and dependence on God — the freedom that comes from being intimately connected, one to another, bearing our burdens together. Yoking brings us together in symbiotic relationship with one another, and with our God.

The truth of the yoke is that our well-being is bound up with the well-being of all of God's creation. We know that, especially in this time of pandemic. Our continued well-being, the health of the whole community, depends on our willingness to be yoked together, to care for one another, bearing the responsibilities of this time as a people, as closely and intentionally as two oxen sharing a yoke, plowing a field. There is a tension here that is really counter-cultural, between rest and freedom, and yoking. And we are called right into the middle of this tension as people of God. We hear Jesus call to us saying, "Come to me and I will give you rest," and think of putting down the plow. And in this time of COVID and racism, of political upheaval and physical separation and disruption, of fear and anxiety and grief, doesn't that sound good?

And then we see the growing lines of our neighbors seeking basic food and necessary supplies, communities of people living without housing in a pandemic. We hear the echo of Al Sharpton's appeal at George Floyd's funeral — "Get your knee off our necks" — and we know that there is still work to do. Our rest and freedom, family of faith, comes from the yoke of Jesus, knowing that we are in this together, and none of us has to carry this burden alone. When we lean into the yoke it becomes easier, because we're going with the Spirit, together. Walking the line, together. Resting together, so that we can be ready to walk the next line, together.

And that, family of faith, is what keeps me going. What can keep us going, when we would rather abandon the field? I may have my image of Will Smith, when I think of Independence Day, and I am sure you have your images too. But as Christians, we are called to set aside an independence that allows us to rest comfortably while others are still suffering and dying, and claim the promise of Christ to bring freedom to all people, and all creation.

Zechariah calls us “prisoners of hope.” And that’s the really good news of our message today — no matter the confusion or the chaos of the world we live in, the yet unresolved sin of racism and homophobia and poverty, the struggle we find within ourselves as we seek to find truth in the midst of it all. Because in the end, all those wars and struggles and movements for independence have been about reaching for a vision of a world of truth and justice and mercy that is here now, and not yet. We can claim with Zechariah that the king is coming, to save God’s people. We can trust that Jesus’ yoke has been adjusted, for us, and that we will find rest when we walk with one another, and with God. And we can sing with Mary her vision of a world where the lowly are lifted up, and the hungry are full, and the prisoners are free.

I end with words from Frederick Douglass, a black freedman and truly a prophet for his time and for ours, spoken on Independence Day 1852, 11 years before the Emancipation Proclamation. “I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery. 'The arm of the Lord is not shortened,' and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of this age. Nations do not now stand in the same relation to each other that they did ages ago. No nation can now shut itself up from the surrounding world and trot round in the same old path of its fathers without interference. The time was when such could be done. Long established customs of hurtful character could formerly fence themselves in, and do their evil work with social impunity. Knowledge was then confined and enjoyed by the privileged few, and the multitude walked on in mental darkness. But a change has now come over the affairs of mankind. Walled cities and empires have become unfashionable. The arm of commerce has borne away the gates of the strong city. Intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe. It makes its pathway over and under the sea, as well as on the earth. Wind, steam, and lightning are its chartered agents. Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together. From Boston to London is now a holiday excursion. Space is comparatively annihilated. Thoughts expressed on one side of the Atlantic are distinctly heard on the other. The far off and almost fabulous Pacific rolls in grandeur at our feet. The Celestial Empire, the mystery of ages, is being solved. The fiat of the Almighty, 'Let there be Light,' has not yet spent its force. No abuse, no outrage whether in taste, sport or avarice, can now hide itself from the all-pervading light . . . . In the fervent aspirations of William Lloyd Garrison, I say, and let every heart join in saying it: ‘God speed the year of jubilee / The whole wide world o'er!’”

Thanks be to God.

\*\*\* Keywords \*\*\*

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