

*The Yoke of Freedom*

Matthew 11:16-19; 28-30

Whitefish UMC

July 6, 2008

- † When you think of some universal symbols of summer, what comes to mind? Maybe picnics, watermelon, lemonade, shorts, boats, fireworks, and that universal footwear of summer, the “flip-flop.”
- † When I was still in seminary and working part-time for the Evanston Public Library, I was asked to decorate the storefront window so that it would be inviting for summer readers. An ancient Woolworth’s, located just around the corner, provided all I needed—a grand selection of cheap flip-flops in various sizes and colors for 79 cents a pair—on sale.
- † So I hung the flip-flops from fishing line at various lengths in the window, along with some “beach reading” books. And everyone got the message. Flip-flops plus good books equals summer at the library. The window elicited many comments that summer.
- † Flip-flops. Signs of summer and fun. But now, in this never-ending political season, signs of derision as well. Both the McCain and Obama campaigns accuse the other of flip-flops on a whole range of issues. One political cartoon features caricatures of both candidates on the beach wearing the flip-flops the other is accused of....
- † Flip-flops. Lest we think they are something new, take a look again at today’s scripture from Matthew’s gospel. As this year’s Independence Day weekend draws to a close, there is a flip-flop

quality to understanding this scripture. It goes counter to our usual way of thinking.

- † John Jewell, in his book *Knowing God*, writes: “America is the home of Davey Crockett who conquered the ‘wild frontier’ and Wyatt Earp who tamed the ‘wild west.’ We honor and value independence, self-sufficiency, strength, and the glory of a ‘self-made’ man or woman.
- † Surrender is what we did not do. With brains and brawn we became a super power in the world. ‘Yankee ingenuity’ is the brilliance that made us great. Resisting the yoke others would put on us is the strength that made us free.
- † Now Jesus comes along to say that conventional wisdom and intelligence did not cut the mustard when it comes to knowing God. Not only is the yoke not to be resisted, we are to voluntarily take this yoke upon ourselves and surrender to the one who is greater than us!
- † How counter-cultural can you get? We cannot fight, or think, or power ourselves into the kingdom of God and the peace of Christ.” And I would add that our real power, our real freedom, both as individuals and as a nation, come not from refusal to submit to the yoke of a source greater than ourselves. Rather our true power and freedom come when we take the yoke of the life that Jesus embodies upon us.
- † But how can that be? Hear this description of a familiar time in history: “The times were hard. The government, a huge bureaucracy that provided so many things like roads and military support and the justice system, was hopelessly out of touch with the people.
- † And the religious establishment wasn’t much better. It seemed so focused on preserving what was that it had little or no vision for what

- might be. When a prophet spoke out, they were vilified, punished, especially if they called into question the decisions of the government.
- † Voices of hope arose, but just as quickly they fell as questions arose about the character of the speaker, about their ability to deliver, or about the transgressions of their past. Apathy was the prevailing ethos in the community. It was not hard to imagine the people asking, “Why even bother when nothing seemed to change?” (Haythorn)
  - † While this description is meant to refer to the time in which Matthew’s gospel was written, it could just as easily apply to our time, couldn’t it? Now I know these are not the usual sentiments of a patriotic holiday weekend. Matthew’s words draw us away from a party mood and back to the realities of our world.
  - † “But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’”
  - † Jesus calls us to come with him, to come because of him, to live and serve as we are called, which may not be as the folks in the marketplace expect. Jesus certainly didn’t meet the expectations of those in the market squares in Palestine. He didn’t dance to their tunes or cry with their false laments. His life called the people, calls us, to something more.
  - † And yet freedom from the expectations of the marketplace, of conventional wisdom, often doesn’t win a person many friends, does it? It certainly didn’t for Jesus, at least not at first.
  - † For Jesus knew himself to be bound to something greater than people’s expectations of him. And that authority, of course, was God.

- † As we celebrate this Fourth of July weekend, isn't it the same for us? When I read today's lectionary gospel in preparation for the holiday weekend, I couldn't help but hear the words engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty echo from the scripture.
- † "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." Freedom. That's what we celebrate this weekend. Freedom to worship, to assemble, to speak, to vote.... The idea of freedom lies at the heart of the democratic experience that was launched 232 years ago. But of course it's not a concept unique to the American experience.
- † Three thousand years before the birth of our nation, an enslaved people cried out to God for deliverance from captivity, for freedom, and God sent a man named Moses in answer to their cry. Seven hundred years later, the prophet Isaiah described the mission of the servant people of God as that of setting the oppressed free. (Isaiah 61:1)
- † Then, of course, Jesus of Nazareth stood in the synagogue and announced that he had been sent by God to proclaim release to the captives and freedom to those who were in bondage. (Luke 3:18)
- † In today's gospel, he says: "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."
- † But wait a minute. Isn't there a paradox here—dare I say even a "flip-flop?" Yes! And it's a paradox and a flip-flop that we can, no must, embrace to fully realize the dream of our nation and our best selves.

- † For all you former Lutherans in the congregation, you may remember Martin Luther’s paradox of freedom: *“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none; and a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”*
- † How can this be? How can we be free and bound at the same time? The gospel is full of paradox: a messiah who is son of God dying on a cross; Jesus’ formula for true discipleship—lose your life in order to save your life; become free through the lordship of Jesus Christ, yet bound to serve others in his name. Be free and submit at the same time...
- † Looking at Jesus, we see him both free and bound in love for God. There is a deep sense of compulsion about his mission: he is often saying things like “I am sent...I must...Not my will but yours be done...” But it is a sense of right compulsion—**of hard but good work to be done.**
- † So our freedom is the committed, focused, and therefore binding freedom to do what is right. It is the combination of accountability and responsibility that we find in our most important relationships—with spouses, children, close friends, or colleagues on an important task—and with fellow citizens in this precious country of ours.
- † But strong forces in our society and in ourselves conspire to make sure we stay in the power of wrong compulsions—like addiction to comfort, security, status, or success—or things like food, drugs, drink, shopping, sex—you fill in the blank—that mask our wounds and loneliness.
- † These are those forces of the marketplace that we find so hard to resist. They are the forces of our collective selves—and our nation—

that urge us to fall into lockstep with a narrow vision of what makes a person whole or successful or smart.

- † Now it's true that political freedom and spiritual freedom are not interchangeable, but they are certainly interdependent. Neither kind of freedom can survive without the required elements of responsibility and mutuality. Joanna Adams, a Presbyterian pastor, says: "I would add a third, making it a trinity: mutuality, responsibility, and humility."
- † She cites this wonderful quotation from the words of Learned Hand, one of our nation's most outstanding judges.

*What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; the spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, nearly two thousand years ago, taught humanity that lesson it has never learned, but has never quite forgotten: that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest.*

- † We Christians are not meant to demand that others submit to the yoke of Christ. For one of the greatest of America's gifts to the world is the notion of religious liberty. The state cannot impose any specific religion on others—or any religion at all.

- † But that doesn't mean that we Christians don't have a critically important role to play in ensuring political freedom as well as the accompanying responsibility to all that goes along with it.
- † When we do, we will follow the One who offers the greatest invitation of all: "Come to me, find peace, find purpose, find meaning, find your best self." Learn the way of Christ, and follow it—take the yoke of freedom upon you. Learn from him, and be gentle and humble in heart. This day and always.
- † For Christ invites us to celebrate and embody the freedom and servanthood he embodied on the night he gave himself up for us, saying....
- † Amen.

Sources:

Rev. Dr. Trace Haythorn, "Jesus' Invitation to Paradox," [www.day1.net](http://www.day1.net)

Rev. Joanna Adams, "The Predicament of Freedom," <http://fourthchurch.org>