

Freedom
Matthew 11:25-30
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, July 6, 2008

Since this is the 4th of July weekend, this is a good time to talk about the freedom we have as Christian disciples. God gives us freedom not to do whatever you want when ever you want. It's not the freedom to indulge your appetites or feed your addictions, popularized by the worn out phrase **"If it feels good, do it."** Instead it's the freedom that comes from grace and the call to discipleship.

A Dennis the Menace cartoon has Dennis and his pal Joey leaving Mrs. Wilson's house with fistfuls of cookies. Dennis says to little Joey, **"Mrs. Wilson gives you cookies not because you're nice, but because she's nice."** In Romans it reads, **"God proved his amazing love for us by this, while we were yet sinners Christ died for us."** (Romans 5:8) In other words God loves us not because we are "nice" but because God is "nice". God desperately wants us to have the freedom to know and enjoy him forever, so he made the first move by sending his only son Jesus into the world, not only to show us the way, but to make the way possible. That's why Jesus chose the cross. But even though the cross is Christ's Declaration of Independence, Jesus declared you and I must claim it, and that takes discipline and hard work.

I've never heard anybody claim that it takes hard work and discipline to give into your anger, lusts or selfishness. Quite the opposite, it's very easy. At that same time it takes discipline, hard work and a growing trust in God to give up your anger, your lusts and your selfish behavior. In other words, if you want to accept God's gift of freedom, you must be willing to work hard for it, or in Paul's words, **"work out your salvation."** (Philippians 2:12)

Not many present day Americans know this but within two months of the heady celebrations surrounding the first July 4th, the fight for freedom and independence was almost a lost cause. Washington's army was defeated three times by the British in New York and was on the run. Volunteers whose six-month enlistments were up were so discouraged they went home. Very few men were willing to be replacements. Washington, his generals and the Signers of the Declaration of Independence were facing the very real possibility of being hanged for treason.

In early December of '76 Thomas Paine published a pamphlet called **"The Crisis"** just as everything looked its darkest. Listen to what he wrote.

"These are times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country, but, he that stands now deserves the love and thanks of all men and women. Tyranny like hell is not easily conquered, yet we have this consolation that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly."

It's interesting to note that if you change a word here and there like **"soldier"** to **"disciple"** and **"country"** to **"kingdom,"** it would be easy to mistake this passage for one of St. Paul's New Testament letters. Listen to this rewording:

"The sunshine disciple will in this crisis shrink from the service of God's Kingdom...yet we have this consolation, the harder the conflict the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly."

Remember the movie Private Ryan? A squad of soldiers was sent by the Secretary of War to bring home a young private fighting in Normandy whose three brothers were killed in the war. Most of the men in the squad gave their lives to save Private Ryan.

One dying soldier's last words to Private Ryan were **"Earn this."** This is Jesus' word to us. **"Earn this."** Not that you could ever repay Jesus for what he accomplished for you on the cross, but his death does demand a response and the right and only response you can give is to claim the freedom Christ won for you.

How? This morning's text points the way. **"Come to me, all you who 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 shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."** (Matthew 11:28-30)

All of us come to the Lord's Table weary from the heavy burdens we carry. You may be worn down from financial worries, problems in your personal relationships, conflicts where you work, a health crisis, fear, anger, envy or despair. And like our inclination to give into our appetites and addictions it is so easy, it takes absolutely no effort to give into these burdens that tire you out. It's so easy to wake up in the middle of the night to pour yourself into a fit of worry over a problem or a fit of anger over a wrong done to you. You don't have to mobilize all your emotional and cognitive resources to give into your burdens. It comes naturally, even automatically.

At the same time it takes discipline and grace to give up your burdens. It takes a decision, commitment and prayer to fight against the burdens that keep you from being free. This is what Paul meant when he encourages us to "work out your salvation." Discipleship takes discipline.

But it also takes grace. God may not take your burden off your shoulders, but he gives you courage and faith to strengthen your shoulder. And this call to discipline and grace that leads to freedom begins with an invitation.

"Come to me..." Jesus is giving you a special personal invitation. Bring your burden to me. Let me help you carry it until you are ready to give it up. **"Learn from me."** Jesus also invites you to learn the promise of salvation. Part of discipleship is learning about God's deep and unsearchable love for you, his deeply mysterious ways that are not your ways, but when you submit to Christ's authority, it becomes your authority. You become aware of the hidden power placed deep within you, and that power is Christ himself. You submit to God's ways and let them become your ways. The result, you are free to love, serve and enjoy God forever.

That's what happens when you put on the yoke of Christ. Not too many of us are familiar with the yoke a farmer puts on a horse or a bull so the animal can pull a wagon or a plough. Working in his father's carpenter shop, Jesus knew that the yoke had to rest easy on the animal; it had to be custom made to fit each animal. So the yoke Jesus gives you is a yoke of submission. Just as a wooden yoke is a necessary tool to get the farm animal to submit to the farmer's authority, the yoke Jesus has for you is custom made.

Jesus doesn't burden you with a one size fits all yoke. Our yoke fits the contours of your unique personality, taking into consideration your gifts and talents, your strengths and weaknesses. And when you become aware of your custom fitted yoke and then let yourself

become comfortable wearing it, then you can start allowing Jesus to lead you into God's will. You can sense a tremendous change in yourself, because now you are willing to submit to Jesus and it's in that submission you experience freedom.

Freedom is God's gift to you. But you have to fight to keep it. As Thomas Paine wrote, **"Tyranny like hell is not easily conquered, yet we have this consolation, the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain cheap, we esteem too lightly."**

Accept Jesus' invitation. Put on his yoke so you can be free from sin and despair and free to love and enjoy God forever.

Let us pray!