



Sunday July 5, 20426

6th Sunday after Pentecost

Today, we continue our celebration of this quarter of a millennium, because this is a momentous time we're going through and today we take some time to reflect on how our faith significantly impacts and informs our civil life together. Recently, in the New York Times, I read that despite all these festivities to mark our 250th anniversary, our country finds itself at a profound crossroads, and there's this struggle to find common ground on which we together can separate as a whole community. The article noted three major reactions that they found. One says that the US is the greatest country in the world founded as a Christian nation with predominantly white European heritage, which we should be proud of, and reclaim as we move forward to the future. That's one view. Then there's this opposing view, the writers found held by many that we have a country found on the theft of land, its enormous wealth and power built on the back of slaves and poor immigrants, and these people don't feel nothing redeemable in that narrative. Third stance is this, our country is founded on principles of freedom and liberty, fought and died for many times. We have at times lived up to these noble principles, but many, many times we have not, but it's the dream about these values that is still worth pursuing and fighting for. Interestingly, it's a perspective that the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass alludes to in his speech back in 1852 in a famous speech entitled, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of Why?" Frederick Douglass models a framework where deep patriotism requires both the fierce criticism and profound appreciation. He established that the criticism is given precisely because the appreciation of where we've gone and accomplished is deserved. Now, Douglass did not mince words about the failure of the church to collectively intervene to end the evils of slavery.

Inspired by Douglass, as I was this past week, I'd like to expand this perspective that is actually informed by today's scripture. Jesus says to us, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Can you remember those words? He says, "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." Now, these words are truly



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revolutionary and give us a blueprint of how we can move forward. They speak to anyone who feels worn down and who hasn't felt worn down by all the infighting and troubles that have come our way. We are promised rest, not a retreat from responsibility, a rest that comes from repenting from wrongdoing, a rest that comes from being freed from whatever oppresses us, a rest that comes from being in right relationships with Jesus and our neighbors, a rest that is empowered when we serve and follow the footsteps of Jesus. The humility of Jesus here is radical because it challenges the typical means of liberation through violence, through coercive power, through war horses like we heard in the Old Testament lesson. Jesus models instead of way of justice rooted in vulnerability and service. Jesus calls the weary and the burdened to come to him. And in real life, many of our neighbors are tired, are they not, in countless ways, a single parent working two jobs, a family that can't afford health care, a student facing discrimination because of their race. I know a person worried about their savings and these are not abstract statistics. These are true people, real people created in God's image.

As a nation marking 250 years, we can hear the same invitation coming from Jesus to us once more. And as Frederick Douglas reminds us, this story of our country has always been beautiful and broken, a grand promise and an ongoing project. We have made real progress. We have made laws to end slavery, to extend voting rights, to protect basic freedoms. We have seen communities rise, innovations flourish, people care for one another. Yet, alongside these accomplishments, our persistent problems, the large and growing wealth inequality, entrenched racism, too much corruption and cynicism in our institutions. So today our anniversary is not an endpoint, but it is an invitation to us in this 250th year to recommit ourselves to the promise of liberty and justice for all people. We do this by carrying the Yoke together, Jesus says, "Remember, He says, 'Take my Yoke upon you.'" A Yoke now leads two animals as they share a heavy load and have a heavy task ahead of them. We are not meant to walk along. As communities and congregations, we can



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partner across differences, rich and poor, black and white, young and old, and bear burdens collectively.

The rallying cry of the colonists was to throw off the Yoke of British tyranny. Today as people of faith, our rallying cry is to take up that Yoke of Jesus. And why? Because this means rejecting the Yoke of extreme inequality and oppression that keeps our nation from moving forward smoothly and effectively. In the Scriptures, all over and over again, they say to break or undo the Yoke in order to deliver people from economic, political or legal systems that crush them. Where burdens are shouldered fairly, we are able to work together for a common good. Because a Yoke joins two animals to act as one. It's a metaphor for relationships that have a shared direction. So that, again, the biblical image of a Yoke, two animals bound to pull as one, helps us to see how people and institutions and nations are joined together for common work. A bad Yoke in public life means bonds are mismatched or oppressive or lead to the whole body, it leads them into harm instead of flourishing.

So, our challenge today is to work for right Yoking. The kind of Yoking that Jesus offers and invites us with him and into one another through right living. So today, we celebrate accomplishments and we are reminded how another nation, the nation Israel in the Bible was called to be Yoked to biblical principles and given a moral compass, guidelines about how to treat the stranger, the poor and the weak in our midst. And time after time, the prophets called the people back when they strayed. So, we too are being called back to these saying moral guardrails, to welcome the stranger, to defend the poor and work for peace and justice. And like the people of Israel, we are called to be a restored nation for God's vision of righteousness can prevail.

So, friends out 250th year is an invitation to return to the better angels of our nature. We too must be critical and appreciative. Like Frederick Douglass and like the prophets of old, knowing that we too have a right to be



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called patriotic, not just those who are out there saying my country right or wrong. And that's why today we sing patriotic hymns, because we want our faith to mold us to be people who are good neighbors, who are merciful, who love kindness and who walk humbly, yoked to God through Jesus. So, may this anniversary be more than fireworks and speeches. Yoked to the principles contained in the gentle humble heart of Jesus, may we be guided to labor together for a more just, a more loving nation, truly striving to live up to the rallying cry of liberty and justice for all. Amen.