

Independence Day weekend has taken on new meaning to me in recent years with the arrival of my children who are now American citizens, though born in Ethiopia. It is awesome to imagine the freedoms and opportunities they will have – already have – as Americans. And yet, independence can be a fleeting notion in our worn-torn world. Jesus reminds us in today's gospel message that independence is not all it's cracked up to be.ⁱ It appears that the wise and the powerful, like ourselves – we all think it is a great thing, but children may not be so sure. Children are very dependent creatures, and Jesus thanks God that the children have understood! Children seem to get this notion of 'the divine enterprise' we might call it, when adults have not a clue. Then Jesus turns to us and says, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." Not what we might describe as a comfortable idea in our contemporary culture. Even though these very verses are included in what is known as 'the comfortable words' in our Rite One Eucharistic liturgy.

The 'yoke' here is, of course, the heavy beam that is fitted and straps over the necks of oxen, binding them together as a team, making it possible for a farmer to direct them with the plow to till the fields. This is not exactly an idea that appeals to us – being tied together and led around by someone else. Few of us want to be burdened in this way or be dependent upon someone else to control how we move, like the farmer does to the oxen. No, we pride ourselves on being independent. We pride ourselves on self-reliance and on being 'in-charge.' This is part of our American Dream, a dream of independence that values the 'self-made-man' in control of his destiny.

And yet – these is not a single soul who has ever lived on this planet who is independent. The more complex our society gets, the more ridiculous the whole notion of independence becomes, because none of us can provide everything we need or use or enjoy as individuals. Thus on Independence Day weekend, when we celebrate the independence from government by another country on another shore, even that does not make us into people who can, in fact, be self-reliant. But we uphold this image with high regard. "Admitting that we need anybody is hard for us," a preacher, Robert Certain, writes, "Even admitting that we need Jesus Christ in our lives, to take charge of our lives – to direct us, to hold us, to pat us on the back when we are happy, to lift us up when we are sad – is hard." Desiring a yoke like the beam across a team of oxen, it just wouldn't seem to fit for us, we might even reason this isn't a psychologically healthy approach in today's world.

But Christ's yoke brings us together and makes us a team of workers, bringing us together as a community – the body of Christ – a community of faith in which we can stand together. Certain says, we can "find strength in one another and find that our weaknesses are dissipated because of our standing and being yoked together as a people." Christ's yoke enables him to be our guide, to direct and rule our hearts, to make us His servants. "to guide us into real productivity and sure success, the kind of success that Christ would want us to have. This success outweighs anything that we desire or deserve." The scriptures make it clear that independence from foreign rule is one thing but independence from God however is the road to despair and destruction. When we rely on our personal will – regardless of our own desires, our intelligence, our power or strength – reliance upon ourselves alone will bring us to that same place that St. Paul describes in his Letter:

"Wretched man that I am," he says. "The very thing that I love, the things of my highest calling, the things I would want to do and to accomplish, those things are things I fail in, over and over again. And the things that I hate, the things that I loathe are what I find myself doing. I cannot do the very things my hearts leads me to do. When I want to help, I wind up hurting. When I want to speak well, I wind up insulting. When I want to care, I wind up turning my back. "wretched man that I am," he says. Who is ever going to save me from this frustration and personal failure? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord because that is where all success is to be found." (Certain)

The success St. Paul refers to – is the very place where we are to find our hope for the future – being totally reliant on Jesus Christ our Savior is where we are to find our greatest success. For if anything is to be worthy – It will be in the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ calls us to put upon our necks his yoke, and to discover how much easier and lighter *his* yoke is than the other yokes we place upon ourselves. The burdens we gather through our pride – whether as an individual or as a church or as a nation – the yoke of Christ is the one that takes the burdens off and becomes light and easy. Imagine being called to go places and do things and speak words we had never dared to dream of – Christ makes this possible. The promise of Christ that his yoke is easy, his burden is light, tells us that God in Christ is with us to build us up, to restore us to wholeness, to restore us to the perfection God had in mind when God created human beings and said, 'behold, it is very, very good. It is just what I had in mind.'

Through the grace of Jesus Christ we are brought back to this place of wholeness and peace. Whatever mess we have made of our lives, and like St. Paul, continue to do in spite of God's goodness – God gives us the power to turn everything to God's purposes no matter how bad it has gotten.ⁱⁱ Human institutions do not bring us the way of

life and peace. These are gifts from God, they are found in our openness to God, our openness to God's people, and our love of God. Honesty with ourselves and God; openness to God's grace, and the willingness to accept God's love for us and to answer the call of Christ, to serve on that oxen team directed by God our farmer.

For who among us is not 'heavy laden'? Whether we are weighted down by ambition or worry, we all come to this altar with our burdens. "Whether we bring a cross of pain, a hunger to know God, a fear of emptiness, a burden of guilt, or just a chip on our shoulder, we are invited to set down our load."ⁱⁱⁱ We are invited to join with our savior who is 'humble and gentle of heart' who will nourish us in the Eucharist with his own life, the holy bread and the cup of our salvation. "Christ invites us to exchange our heavy burdens for easy ones, and he will take ours and shoulder them to glory in the shape of his cross."^{iv}

Every nation on the face of the earth exists under God, whether they have known it or not. Likewise, every person and other creatures who have lived on the face of the earth is a child of God, a creature of God, whether they acknowledge it or not. Jesus invites us today to acknowledge God's grace in our lives, to take the yoke of Christ upon us and discover that his burden is light, lighter because it is shared and because God our farmer is our guide, directing our work, our team work out in the fields of daily living. "We are called here by Christ himself to seek his purposes on earth, not our purposes but his purposes, and so set our minds on the joyous Kingdom of God in the world around us."^v The kingdom of God that is right here in our midst. This is the promise of freedom in Christ Jesus.

ⁱ "Take My Yoke" by The Rev. Dr. Robert G. Certain, July 7, 2002 from stmargarets.org.

ⁱⁱ Certain.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Learn from me" in *I AM: Teaching sermons on the incarnation*, Penelope Duckworth and Roland Allen, editors. Abington Press, 1998, page 28.

^{iv} Duckworth and Allen.

^v Certain.