

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 5 July 2020
St. Michael's Episcopal Church Online
Zechariah 9:9-12; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
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This morning, the fifth Sunday after Pentecost, the appointed lessons begin with “Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion” and conclude with “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” I have Handel’s Messiah ringing in my ears, and under normal circumstances we would hear our soprano soloist singing “Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice greatly...” and the choir laughing their way through “His yoke is e-
hee-hee-hee-easy...” and our hearts would be lifted up in delight together.

But we’re not there yet.

Yesterday was July 4th—Independence Day, some of us call it. And so I have the score to the musical “1776” ringing in my ears. John Adams, Ben Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson on the stairs of Constitution Hall, “...waiting for the scratch, scratch, scratch of that tiny little fellow/Waiting for the egg to hatch, /on this humid Monday morning/ in this congressional incubator...” What sort of bird shall it be, what sort of nation is being brought to birth in that moment?

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness...”

Fine and noble words. A worthy aspiration for a new nation.

We’re not there yet.

In 1776, “all men” meant men, and a certain class of men at that. There were no women present to sign the Declaration of Independence. There were no people of color in the room where it happened. There were no Indigenous people present, despite the fact that their ancestors had lived on this continent for centuries before the coming of the Europeans. No one below a certain socio-economic status lined up on that day to affix their signature to that document.

244 years later, we are at a crossroads in this country, and in the wider world.

We have discovered that “absolute independence” as a personal or civic goal is disastrous.

We have discovered—and continue to discover—that the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness at the expense of other persons, groups, and nations, and even the creation itself, is not an acceptable course of action.

No one can be truly free until all are truly free.

Liberty for only some, is bondage for others.
Happiness acquired by exploitation is death wrapped up in a pretty package.

We're learning some things, these days.
Things we had not known, or had forgotten,
or had deliberately put away from us in memory's back closet and ignored.

But as the poet Maya Angelou was fond of saying, "When you know better, you do better."
We're learning to know, and (I hope) to do better.
We're on the way.
But we're not there yet.

Jesus speaks to people at a crossroads this morning in the Gospel—quite literally, he's addressing the crowd in the street, who have been standing around eavesdropping on a conversation between Jesus and some of the followers of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is in prison by now, having spoken so powerfully against the political leaders of the community that he has been locked up, awaiting execution. John's followers come to Jesus to ask "Are you the one we've been waiting for, or is someone else coming later?" After they and Jesus have talked together, they return to John in prison, and Jesus turns to the crowds in some disgust.

"What shall I say about you all?
John came to you, a strict ascetic, telling you exactly what you should do,
and you called him a madman;
The Son of Man comes to you, in joy and conviviality and friendship
and you complain that he's hanging around with the wrong crowd!
What else is there to say?
And yet Wisdom—the personification of the Spirit of God—is demonstrated, shows herself
present, in action and life."

Jesus prays to the Father—and suddenly we're in the Gospel of John for a moment. "I thank you Father...no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son reveals him." Jesus and the Father are inseparable, there is no difference or division between them. Then, the punchline: "Come to me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

Do you know anyone who is not carrying some burden, friends? Is there anyone in your circle of acquaintance who is not struggling in some way—perhaps silently, hidden from the eyes of everyone but God alone? Especially now, in these days?

I've never met such a person. Everyone I know, everyone you know, is struggling somehow.

Every. Single. One.

“Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me...for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

It’s an agricultural image. The yoke is a collar, that allows the farm animals (oxen, horses) to pull the cart or the plow or whatever vehicle. And a yoke is almost always double—the work is shared. Commentators on the Hebrew scriptures tell us that the image of “yoke” is used as to describe the “...joyful disciplined study of Torah.” (from the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*) A way of working together that requires submission-in-cooperation, with others. Not “absolute independence” to say or do or think anything at all, but to enter into a relationship of learning and receptivity—the Yoke, the teaching and leading of Jesus’ Way of love and joy and friendship, guiding everyone who comes to him.

We’re not there yet. But we are on the way.

I’ve been a priest for almost twenty years now. And I know I haven’t learned everything I need to know yet. I am not the person, the leader, the human being God wants me to be yet. I lose my temper, I act out of frustration, I take people for granted—too often, and most frequently the people I care about the most. And I am sorry. That’s not who I want to be.

But I’m learning. God isn’t finished with me yet. Or with any one of us, or with us as a people. God is still teaching, and leading, and guiding us along the way to the holiness God desires for us all.

Come, people of God, St. Michael’s Church.

Come, let us walk, and learn, and grow together in the Way of Love.

We’re not there yet. But we are on the way.

Amen.