

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Yesterday, you may have noticed, was the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence by the Second Continental Congress, which we have come to regard as the birthday of our country. In the July newsletter I wrote briefly about how I have experienced this anniversary year differently from the bicentennial we celebrated in my youth, 50 years ago, so I won't say more about that now, except to note that I titled that reflection, "The Blessings of Liberty." It's liberty I want to talk about today, because especially our second reading from Romans is pulling on that thread, and because I want us to be able to think about the liberty we celebrate this holiday weekend in light of our gospel proclamation that the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. Freedom is the word we use more commonly today. I got the "blessings of liberty" title from the preamble to the Constitution, which, like many of you, I memorized as a child.

The Lutheran take on freedom goes back another 256 years to 1520, when Martin Luther wrote three of his most famous works, one of which was entitled "On Christian Liberty," also known as "The Freedom of a Christian." It came in response to objections to Luther emphasizing Paul's assertion in Romans that we don't earn our salvation by our works, it is only our faith that makes us right with God. The objection was that if people were left to do whatever they wanted, they would only serve themselves, and there wouldn't be any such thing as "good works" on behalf of others. Luther agreed, in part. If we humans, in our sinful condition, were given absolute freedom, that would be a disaster. Paul is getting at one aspect of this in our second reading this morning. He knows that identifying what we want and doing what we want are two very different things, even when what we want is to do good. And you know this to be true for yourself. You know you should get off the couch and go for a walk, you know that you should stop eating from that bag of Doritos or that packet of cookies, you know that you should be more generous with your time and treasure. But so often something stops you – inertia; uncontrollable appetite; fear that you won't have enough time or treasure for yourself if you share them with others. You can surely come up with your own examples.

Faced with this confounding reality, this impossible game, Paul throws up his hands. "Who will help? Who will get me out of this impossible situation?" His answer is "thanks be to God through Jesus Christ," but he doesn't elaborate. That will have to wait for chapter 8, which we'll get to next week. But spoiler alert, it's about the Holy Spirit reorienting our lives and realigning our values with those of God. What this looks like in Luther's treatise on Christian freedom is spelled out in its opening thesis, which at first glance seems self-contradictory. Luther writes, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." But then he continues: "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Both of these, he insists, are true, and at the same time. Baptized into Christ, we are free to do whatever we want. But what we want is now being reoriented toward the neighbor and the neighbor's needs by the Holy Spirit working in us.

Here is where our Gospel reading comes in. This generation, Jesus says, will never be satisfied with your performance in their game. You can try to play along, you can follow all the rules, but it will never be enough. And that's because the game is impossible. It's designed to keep things as they are, because the ones calling the tunes are benefitting from the way things work now. If you dare to call for a change, which is what John the Baptist means by repentance,

then you are a crazy person. If you show compassion like Jesus and advocate for those who the game has decided are losers, then you're a loser too, and a troublemaker and a disturber of the peace. I will leave it to you to decide how that might or might not apply to our own context on this anniversary of what we like to call the land of the free. I'll let you consider for yourself whether the dynamic Jesus ascribes to his generation might also apply to us; whether it might crop up were you to, say, use your freedom to notice how a few of our people seem to be freer than others, and that the freer *they* get, the less free *others* seem to be. I'll let you judge for yourself whether patriotism can bear for the story we tell about ourselves to be investigated for veracity or critiqued in any way.

Jesus' response to the impossible game was to stop trying to play it and to follow him instead, to become his disciple. That's what the image of the yoke is about here. The yoke was commonly used in this time and place as an image for a disciple's relationship to a teacher. The yoke was taking on the burden of the master's teaching, a body of knowledge and skills. Jesus claims that following him is a relief from the impossible game, that the yoke is easy and the burden is light. It's about loving God and loving your neighbor, as he will tell us later in Matthew. Just two commandments - one for each side of the yoke, huh? No wonder it's so light. But it's only easy if we can also let go of the other yoke, which turns out to be very hard for us to do. Because we keep believing in the impossible game, determined to be one of its winners, no matter how many losers we have to push past.

The promise, or the threat if we insist on holding onto that old yoke, is that the days of the impossible game are numbered. God will not allow it to go on forever. And that is the vision given us by Zechariah in our first reading, which we heard Matthew quote back on Palm Sunday as Jesus entered Jerusalem on his way to the cross. We do well to remember today that the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus is ushering in through his death and resurrection stands in stark contrast to the kingdoms of this world, even the very best of those kingdoms. Its king is humble. Can you even *imagine* a humble king anymore? His victory comes not through weapons of war – all of that will be “cut off,” says Zechariah – the chariot, the warhorse, the battle bow (think aircraft carriers, tanks, missiles, and drones.) True freedom and true peace cannot be had at the point of a sword. War is a false idol.

One last thing. I read this week an article that referred to the French diplomat Alexis de Tocqueville's observation about American freedom from the early 1830s. He noted, like Paul, that freedom is a dangerous thing for human beings, easily abused and destructive to common life. In his opinion, the only thing that made it work in the American context was that the population on the whole was religious, and thus recognized what Luther asserted, that freedom must live side-by-side with responsibility for the common good – which, by the way, is part of that preamble to the Constitution that I mentioned earlier. Now don't get me wrong. The last thing I want is for us to force religion on people, not least because that never really works. I do not think that we are, or should be, a “Christian nation,” or that a “Christian nation” is even a real thing. But I do think that we need Jesus and his yoke, and that the only way we get that is by being prisoners of hope, trusting that he will deliver on his promise of the Kingdom of Heaven, trust that is the work of the Holy Spirit when that promise is remembered and repeated. So let us stick to that game plan, which is not impossible, but which brings true freedom and life that really is life. And as we do, may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.