

Proper 9A – July 6, 2014

Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Psalm 45:11-18; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) These words are often heard by us as if Jesus was referring to everyone who works hard or who is weighed down with all kinds of trouble. Sure, we can apply them that way. Yet, in the context of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus was focused on those who labored and were heavy laden from following all the religious rules and obeying all the religious observances and customs of the day. *“Lighten up! Take it easy!”* Jesus is saying to them in this gospel. Your earnest yet anxious religiosity is a hard burden to bear. Paul goes even further in our reading from his letter to the Romans by describing this anxious way of living as being held captive. These days we may not feel as burdened by the religious codes and observances of our forebears, but many of us have replaced all that with a modern “rat race” or some other forms of frenzied anxious toil that are just as burdensome and enslaving.

Many of us also labor under the illusion that the yoke we bear is a single one and that all the plowing, as it were, is up to us. Yet Jesus offers us again and again *his* yoke—a *double yoke*, as it were, a tandem yoke which, when we bind ourselves into it, somehow becomes lighter. It’s lighter because it is a shared yoke, one we share with Jesus who allows us to join his team, to do what we can do; but when we can’t do anymore, he is there next to us, carrying it forward while we rest.ⁱ We sang in our opening hymn, “I bind unto myself today...”;ⁱⁱ and as members of Christ’s Body, the Church, we practice our religion—from the Latin *religio*, meaning “to bind together,” from the same root word as the word “ligament,” which helps the human body bind together. To bind ourselves to anything, even to Christ’s yoke, or Christ’s Body, may appear on the surface to limit our freedom. Yet, to *bind* ourselves to him and his yoke is *real freedom*, for freedom is what being a Christian is about.ⁱⁱⁱ To love God means to belong to God and no one and nothing else; *but* to love and serve God means to love and serve everyone else. And that service is true *freedom* because it is based on the law that sets everyone free, the Law of Love. As St. Augustine stated in his well-known prayer, “O You who are the light of the minds that know you; the life of the souls that love you; and the strength of the wills that serve you; help us so to know you that we may truly love you; so to love you that we may fully serve you; whom to serve is perfect freedom.”

On this Fourth of July weekend, let us remember the ancient Roman writer, Tacitus, who defined patriotism as “entering into praiseworthy competition with one’s ancestors.”^{iv} So now, here we are in these United States, 238 years after our Declaration of Independence was put forth declaring both freedom *from* the tyranny of British rule and freedom *for* creating a society where the liberties to speak, worship, and assemble publicly—and to pursue happiness—were its hallmarks. These hallmarks of freedom were not just personal or individual,

however, but were placed in the context of service for the *common good*. John Adams, for example, spoke frequently of “public happiness,” and linked it with the “common good” (a term used as far back as St. Paul). To deny people the right to participate in decisions that affect their lives, as was the case in the colonies, was to Adams “to deprive them of public happiness.”^v As well, freedom was linked with *virtue* by our forebears and virtue was given *public* meaning, in contrast with its more exclusively private or individual emphases today. As Samuel Adams stated, “We may look to armies for our defense, but virtue is our best security. It is not possible that any state should long remain *free* where *virtue* is not supremely honored.”^{vi} Freedom to our forebears was not freedom to do as you please; it was freedom to be pleased to do as you can for the common good.^{vii} And because freedom was practically synonymous with virtue, and virtue was understood in very public and social and not just personal or individual terms, we turned out a generation of political leaders named Washington, Jefferson, the Adams’s (that’s John, Abigail and Samuel), Ben Franklin, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison—albeit human beings with personal shortcomings, and people of their time with what we today see as glaring omissions, for example, in their moral perceptions regarding people of color and women.^{viii}

We as a nation are still a work in progress. As former Union Army General and U.S. Senator from Missouri, Carl Schurz, said more than 140 years ago during a debate on the floor of the Senate: “The Senator from Wisconsin cannot frighten me by exclaiming, ‘My country, right or wrong.’ In one sense I say so, too. My country; and my country is the great American Republic. My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right.”^{ix} Or as William Sloane Coffin put it, “The best patriots are not uncritical lovers of their country, any more than they are the loveless critics of it. True patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s eternal lover’s quarrel with the entire world.”^x We know of great things—essential things—that have happened when people worked together toward a common good—exercising the disciplines and responsibilities of freedom, carrying the burden of citizenship, bearing the yoke of social responsibility—whether during wartime, or for example, in the Civil Rights Movement and other large movements for positive social change; or as local communities organizing for safe streets, affordable housing, cleaner environment, living wage jobs, good schools, or supporting neighbors after major storms. As we bear one another’s burdens, we so fulfill the law of Christ, the law of liberty (as St. Paul [Gal. 6:2] and the letter of James [1:25] put it).

Finally, we know that in human societies neither government institutions nor the market economy nor individuals alone can make society and humanity free and flourishing. These must be balanced by a strong civil society made up of ethical and cultural, civic and religious institutions—groupings such as families, schools, neighborhood associations, synagogues, mosques and churches, and other voluntary associations—actively seeking to build the bonds of our common humanity and serve the common good. We shouldn’t underestimate these institutions, including our own parish, which at their best build in us the habitual

practice of public virtues essential to our personal and societal freedom—virtues such as honesty, self-control, community-mindedness and respect, without which neither government nor the market economy nor we as individuals could function for the common good.

ⁱ As William Sloane Coffin pointed out, what is so wonderful about our relationship with God is not only what God gives in terms of hope and strength, challenge and courage, but also what God never takes away, namely support. It's a wonderful thing to be loved by someone who is never in competition with you, someone who wants only your well-being. Christ is that someone, the only one in your life who will never compete with you. See William Sloane Coffin, Living the Faith in a World of Illusions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 94-95.

ⁱⁱ The Hymnal 1982 (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation), Hymn 370.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yet, it's a freedom that has no higher loyalties than to God and to God's law of love. Many of us find ourselves bound to many commitments, pursuits, and distractions—whether serious or trivial. In many of these connections we find ourselves still seeking more profound and enduring ties. Binding ourselves to Christ's double yoke means being bound to the One who sets and keeps all human commitments and natural energies in motion. Christ is the source and goal who links us with these commitments and energies and empowers us with God's goodness, truth and beauty. Thus, binding ourselves to God means coming to our true selves and therefore being free to share ourselves with others. In our reading from Paul's letter to the Church in Rome, Paul wrestles with the seemingly enslaving aspects of his religious law—but works through it. Listen to his "Declaration of Interdependence" in his letter to the church in Galatia (5:1,13-14): "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

^{iv} Gaius Cornelius Tacitus, "The Life of Cnaeus Julius Agricola" in Complete Works of Tacitus, Moses Hadas, ed. (New York: Modern Library/Random House, Inc. 1942), A.3.55.5

^v As William Sloane Coffin pointed out, Adams objected to taxation without representation, for example, not because taxes were large and taking a bite out of individual wallets—in fact, taxes were quite small—but rather he objected because the representation of those paying taxes in the British colonies was nil. (See William Sloane Coffin, A Passion for the Possible (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 79).

^{vi} Quoted in William Sloane Coffin, Living the Truth in a World of Illusions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 95

^{vii} All of our early American leaders read the French political philosopher Charles Montesquieu who differentiated various societies, for example, tyranny from monarchy from democracy. In each of these forms, he found a governing principle: for tyranny it was fear; for monarchy it was honor; and for democracy it was virtue. (See Coffin, A Passion for the Possible, Ibid., p. 80).

^{viii} William Sloane Coffin pointed out that with a population today of more than 100 times the 3 million who were Americans in 1776, we don't seem to produce leaders like that these days. And why? One reason seems evident—as Plato said, "What's honored in a country will be cultivated there." So we have superb athletes and generally inferior political leaders—with a few exceptions (Coffin, A Passion for the Possible Ibid., p. 80).

Having said this, it is also important to remember that the great philosophers of that time—Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, David Hume, Jean Jacques Rousseau - who each had had significant influence on our founding fathers and mothers—believed that freedom within a society was not,

and could not be, much more than freedom *from* interference and concentrations of arbitrary power. The guarantee of freedom in society was more a set of *negative* checks and balances designed to prevent unjust accumulation of influence. In their view, freedom in society is essentially “negative” (freedom *from*) because there cannot be, in principle, agreement among diverse human groupings about the “positive” ends of political communities (freedom *for*), beyond the protection of the liberties of the individuals who compose it. And so society (e.g. a city, a nation, a group of nations) that is no more than amoral (if not downright immoral) in its individual parts cannot really be made to “stand for” something whether what it would stand for is coming from a religious right or a more secular left. In other words, so-called free society offers no salvation and cannot become a Kingdom of God on earth – for us or for others. It can only offer protections from excesses and oppression. These philosophers offered grave warnings on free societies’ abilities to even offer such protection. For example, Jean Jacques Rousseau insisted that obsession with private interests would lead to a neglect, or distortion, of public duty, and amid such neglect or distortion, despotism might thrive in various forms even within so-called free society; and both public virtue and personal freedom would be corrupted. And, continuing this logic, to force this upon other nations and regions can run the risk of doing not even the limited good we want, but the evil we do not want (in the words of St. Paul) – a very heavy yoke we end up bearing and imposing on others.

^{ix} Carl Schurz, spoken on the U. S. Senate floor, February 29, 1872; quoted in *The Congressional Globe*, Vol. 45, p. 1287.

^x William Sloane Coffin, The Heart is a Little to the Left (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College University Press of New England, 1999), pp. 56-57.