

TIME AFTER PENTECOST: LECTIONARY 13 (PROPER 8) (C-RCL) June 30, 2019

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Psalm 16; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62
University Lutheran Church, Cambridge, MA;
Greg Mileski with additions by Imogene Stulken
Ecumenical Prayer Cycle: Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda

(A note from Imogene: The sermon in its original form was written by Pastor Greg Mileski. Due to a family emergency, he was called out of town, so he sent the sermon to me saying, "feel free to beg, borrow, and steal whatever you like, however you like." I kept all of Greg's sermon, but I added a new opening, and – to complement Greg's reflection on the Galatians text – I inserted other material for an expanded focus on the Gospel – including an extended citation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Greg's sermon is presented here in blue-purple type; my contributions are presented here in black type.)

On the Fourth of July weekend in 2011, I was the guest pastor at the United Church in Bernardston, MA. The year was an "A" year in the lectionary, so we were reading from Matthew's Gospel. The text that morning included the words: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me . . . and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." [Matthew 11:28-29, NRSV]

The person who had invited me to preach was Steve; years earlier, Steve had been an active participant in the Protestant Campus Ministry at Lowell. In our conversations before the service, I mentioned to him that I was planning to focus on the "yoke" passage. Resourceful as ever, Steve came up with the perfect object for the children's lesson – a real yoke loaned to us from a local farmer. (This was a yoke for a young pair of oxen, so it was a relatively small one.)

The word "yoke" appears in the first and second readings for today – in the First Reading as a literal yoke over pairs of oxen. In the Bible, "yoke" can also signify obedience to the Torah of God or obedience to Christ. Or: "Yoke" is used figuratively to symbolize servitude, submission, hardship. Yoke is also a symbol of slavery – for example, to sin. More on that later. For now, back to the Fourth of July.

For Pastor Greg, the Fourth of July is one of his favorite holidays. He says:

Much of that, I'm sure, is that it is in July and I'm usually on some kind of summer break and that celebrations include sitting outside in the heat with a grill and hoping the thunderstorms hold off. I'm not crazy about fireworks, honestly, but they don't do any harm, I guess. There is, of course, another part to the holiday, the reason for the season, you might say: national independence. It's a welcome opportunity, I think, to remember the lofty ideals we hold ourselves to, the truths which we hold to be self-evident that we so often fall so short of. And perhaps now more than ever, in the midst of this tumultuous time in our history, while we struggle to speak the set of values central to our story—perhaps now more than ever—it is worth reflecting on what ideas of freedom we value most.

[Pastor Greg continues:] Oh sure, there are the messages of freedom that are tied to mattress sales and truck sales and opportunities to discover a new you. In ads and messages, we will hear about the freedom and liberty to choose what we want when we want. But beneath that message, deeper than the ads, there is percolating up in our discourse a definition of freedom: that freedom is the freedom [to] choose me for me, to choose me in such a way that disregards you—well, maybe not you, but some other you out there anyway. It is the freedom to place myself in the center and to draw my circle of concern where I think it will benefit me the most. We see this in our inability to take seriously the threat climate change poses to future generations, especially the future poor who will cope less easily. We see this in our embrace of religious and political tribalism, of defining identities against other people. And we see this in the easy scapegoating of immigrants and refugees in our midst. There is a definition of freedom at play in our culture where freedom is the freedom to disregard those others who I do not believe will benefit me. It is a freedom to define our obligations to others based on their obligations to me. I draw my circle around these but no more and that is how I will sit atop my own empire.

And as we see in Paul's letter to the Galatians, this is not a new part of the human story. Paul sets up two contrasting visions in this passage, the way of the flesh and the way of the Spirit. The way of [the flesh is] a freedom that leads to "strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels," and the like, and the way of [the Spirit is] a freedom that leads to "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

There were those who had come to the Galatians and told them that to be part of Christian community is to join a club, to trade one in-group/out-group for a different in-group/out-group, to draw your circle somewhat differently. That is the way of the world, that is the way of flesh, Paul tells them. That is the world as it has always been and if you do that you're just recreating the same error from the center of a different circle and there is only the "strife and anger and jealousy" you've always known.

Such "freedom" may not actually be freedom at all. In fact, it may really be an enslavement. Paul mentions the "yoke of slavery."

But you have been set free from that false sense of freedom. You have been set free from the view that freedom is "who will serve me" for the view that freedom is "the freedom to serve." As Paul says: "For freedom Christ has set us free. For you were called to freedom, dear siblings – but through love become slaves to one another." [Galatians 5:1, 13] As Martin Luther wrote in his Treatise on Christian Liberty: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." ["Martin Luther Treatise on Christian Liberty (1520),"

<https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/165luther.html>, accessed 1.10.2018]

In this way of the Spirit, the Church becomes a new way of being in the world, a new way of relating to the world. In Christ, our ties to one another are reevaluated even such that our closest relationships, those to our families[,] become reimagined. It is this different kind of circle drawing that Jesus is getting at, I think, with these strange words about family. The starkness of this language, the shock of it, is not meant as a denigration of family, but as a reevaluation of the whole of human relationships. As you love those who are closest to you, love others. As you love yourself, love others.

In a meditation entitled “Beginning with Christ” for New Year’s Day, 1934, Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflects on today’s Gospel text. He writes:

.... Our text tells us about a young man who is obviously very taken with Jesus, who perhaps has been waiting a long time for a chance to express his enthusiasm. Now here comes Jesus into the town, and the enthusiast runs to meet him, stands in front of him, and says: I will follow you wherever you go. He wants to make the first move himself; with glowing devotion he offers himself, thinking he will be able to do everything asked of him and to leave everything behind, for this man. But Jesus demurs, suspicious of this enthusiasm. Do you know what you are doing? Do you know who I am, and where following me is going to lead you? Do you know that I need not someone who throws himself at me with enthusiasm, but rather someone with a firm, unshakeable faith based only on my having called you? Have I called you? Are you coming simply and only in answer to my call? You are enthusiastic; you want to make a new beginning: think about what you are doing and whom you are daring to approach and remember that enthusiasm is only one step away from embarrassment!

[Bonhoeffer continues:] Jesus himself calls to the second person in the story. This is someone living in the past, hanging onto some significant grief that he cannot forget. This person no longer looks forward to the future but would rather fade away into the past and into the world of the dead. Jesus’ call is to step forward, out of all that. The person hesitates, wants to go back once more. No, “Let the dead bury their dead” – leave the past behind, free yourself – now or never. Christ calls you to a new beginning – take your chance, just because it is he! Now, today, because Christ is moving on – go with him, answer his call, now!

[Bonhoeffer adds:] The third person surely would like to go with Christ. This is someone who takes it seriously and therefore surely can be allowed to attach a small condition to the offer to come and follow Jesus. “Please let me first . . .” Certainly I want to come, but surely you understand, Lord, I just need to do this

and that “first.” No, Christ doesn’t understand, doesn’t want to understand. “No one who puts his hand to the plow . . .” A man guiding a plow does not look back, but he also doesn’t look way ahead into the unpredictable distance – only as far as the next step he has to take. Looking back is not the Christian thing to do. Leave your fear, worry, and guilt behind. Look up at the one who has given you a new beginning.

[*The Collected Sermons of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, translated from the German by Douglas W. Stott, Anne Schmidt-Lange, Isabel Best, Scott A. Moore, & Claudia D. Bergmann; edited by Isabel Best, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012, pp. 125-126.]

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer speaks further about Jesus’ call to discipleship when he says that “costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a [person] to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light.’” And submitting to this yoke is the way of the Spirit. [Cited in https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cost_of_Discipleship, accessed 6.29.2019]

This way of the Spirit, this different vision of freedom is a reorientation to all our relationships. It is a widening of our circle beyond the boundaries we learn from the world, beyond only those who might serve us, to include the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the migrant, the refugee, future generations, and even enemies. This [is] a circle that widens as the Reign of God enters the world.

That is not a message we are likely to hear echoed back to us in car commercials this week. And if we adopt this message of freedom carelessly or recklessly, freedom to serve others can become freedom to be steamrolled by others. Going out into the world and opening ourselves so wide that we are only hurt does not speak the Gospel love of Jesus. The message of the Gospel is that we are free to widen our circles, to open ourselves to the world, but if that only results in harm, nothing is gained. “Love your enemies,” “Be slaves to one another in love,” “Love your neighbor as yourself”—these are not calls to carelessness for ourselves and others. By no means. But they are calls to resist the message of the world that freedom is a freedom to live for ourselves at the expense of others. They are calls to resist the message that we have “permission to do whatever we want.” [*Sundays and Seasons*, 2019, Year C, © 2018

Augsburg Fortress, p. 220] They are calls to resist the message that freedom is the ability to choose indifference toward others. Sometimes the circles must constrict so that it can be widened more another day.

And it is that process, that awareness, that pushing wider the circle of our concern for others, that distinguishes the way of the world from the way of the Spirit.

“Learn from me,” Jesus says. “Listen to my teaching, yes – but more than that: Be my apprentices. Learn by listening; learn by watching; learn by doing. For I am there with you. Become my teammate, my yoke mate. The hard work will seem less strenuous, for my burden is light – for I have worn the yoke of the cross for you.”

As we reflect on what freedom means this week and going forward, may we remember the freedom we have been given, that in Christ we have been freed to look upon the stranger, the hurting, the cast-aside, the ones the world tells us are outside our circle of concern, as our very own family, as our very own selves. In Christ, we have [been] freed to see others as Christ sees us, as beloved [siblings], as [beloved] children of God. In Christ, we have been freed not from others, but freed to be bound to one another in love.

And may it be so. Amen.