

# My Burden is Light

July 5, 2020

I have one contrasting point to make today—and I THINK I can make it briefly: the yoke of empire is heavy, tight, and deadly; the yoke of Jesus is freedom, breath, life. As we celebrate Independence Day, let's recognize that true independence comes from interdependence. True independence is not nationalist aggrandizing and personal license. America's democratic, people-powered heart beats most strongly when we recognize our common shares in our Earth, our nation, our culture. The yoke of empire is heavy, tight, and deadly; the yoke of Jesus is freedom, breath, life.

Recently, Lisa and I have taken up yoga, at the instigation of our daughter, Rheanne, who has a friend back in Philadelphia, Mallory, who is a certified yoga instructor and who has taken to teaching via Zoom. It's been great; Mallory understands the spirituality behind the practice, even if Lisa and I don't exactly understand how to contort our bodies into the various postures. We struggle, let's say. Like many people of a certain vintage, we've accumulated our various ailments over the years—mine concentrated especially in my knees, Lisa in her lower back. But we enjoy the practice, and although it doesn't make up for our gym being closed, it does get the heart pumping and we do some amazing stretching—so it's all good.

Yoga comes to mind for me because the word in our gospel, "Take my yoke upon you," is the same root, etymologically, as "yoga" in Sanskrit. The yoke Jesus is speaking of would have evoked for his peasant audience the yoke used for oxen or other cattle. Jesus was talking to people, as the gospel makes clear, who were not among the wise and the intelligent. He was talking to ordinary folk, who may in fact have been carrying heavy burdens, just like some of us, yoked to labor. Slavery, of course, was commonplace in Jesus' day, but even freed people worked very, very hard.

One of the things that biblical scholars of the past 20 years or so have discovered is how it was EMPIRE that yoked so many Roman citizens to brutal and short lives. Indebtedness was rampant in the first century CE. Hierarchies were absolute. Most people were subservient to one, if not many, overlords. Scholars like Richard Horsley, in "Jesus and Empire," or Laurel Cobb in "Mark and Empire—Feminist Reflections," have taught us to understand that the economic yoke of empire was heavy, tight, and deadly.

So let me ask you: have you ever felt weighed down by our economic order? Have you ever felt the yoke of our empire—with so many of our tax dollars not going to roads, or bridges, or infrastructure, but to weapons for military and police? Have you felt that yoke?

And even though we just celebrated the 4th of July, of all 4ths of July in my memory, this does not seem one that we can as Christians celebrate lightly, does it?

For a little perspective, I went back to a famous address delivered at Rochester, NY on July 4, 1852 by the former slave Frederick Douglass. In the speech, Douglass spoke as follows:

*Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? and am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us?*

*Would to God, both for your sakes and ours, that an affirmative answer could be truthfully returned to these questions! Then would my task be light, and my burden easy and delightful. ... But such is not the state of the case. I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common.—The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony.*

Harsh words, but true: the yoke of Empire is heavy, tight, and deadly.

So, our music for this Sunday, you may have noticed, takes a decidedly different turn than typical “patriotic” hymns and odes to American greatness that you would hear in many churches this Sunday. No. Not this year. Yes, we hear the music, and can sing these great songs—but we do so in different modes. Rissel and Matt, with help from Sam Stranz—who has often played tenor sax at Union over the past year—have arranged the hymns to bring out something other than easy rejoicing; to bring out the kind of mourning that Frederick Douglass saw as necessary in 1852, and that we may feel in the era of COVID-19, and the era of Black Lives Matter. And, of course, we’ve featured some of America’s greatest composers—African Americans, all: Duke Ellington, Scott Joplin, Oscar Peterson. We celebrate America by celebrating some of America’s greatest composers.

Frederick Douglass went on, back in 1852:

*At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability, and could reach the nation's ear, I would, today, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced. What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty*

*and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes.”*

Douglass goes on like that for another 20 minutes or so—and I promise NOT to do that. But it's worth pointing out that Douglass leveled his strongest critique at the churches and Christians. Christians were guilty of sins of both commission and omission, as he saw it. Many theologians and pastors, South AND North, committed the sin of arguing that slavery was part of God's plan, and that obedience to law and order overruled liberty and justice for all. They sinned by actively perpetuating injustice, in the name of Jesus! Even more, churches, and Christian people, failed to act to stop injustice. As Douglass put it: “Let the religious press, the pulpit, the Sunday School, the conference meeting, the great ecclesiastical, missionary, Bible and tract associations of the land array their immense powers against slavery, and slave-holding; and the whole system of crime and blood would be scattered to the winds.”

And the same remains true today: Let Christians and other people of faith unite to practice what we preach, and the scourge of racism, the sin of sexism, the stain of inequality, the suffering of injustice would be scattered to the winds.

Because the yoke of Jesus is freedom, breath, and life.

Christianity grew as dramatically as it did in the first century because it gave people oppressed by empire an alternative: true independence. This wasn't the independence of autonomy, of self-law or license. It was like the independence of yoga: people could practice what they preached; find unity between breath and life; discover independence through interdependence with the Earth, each other, and with God. As Jesus put it in our gospel: “learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart.” Some yoke: learn!

In our first reading for today, from the Song of Solomon, we see a clear example of God's independence as interdependence; freedom as relationship; the joy (and responsibility) of mutual love.

As you probably remember, the Song of Solomon is an erotic love poem. It is an extended dialogue between two lovers, conveying their passion for each other in language that is as strong as Douglass' critique, only now highlighting the universal beauty of human attraction and erotic desire. Across the centuries, we can identify with the words of the lover, in this season of summer, as found in the NIV translation:

*“Arise, my darling, my beautiful one, come with me.  
See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone.  
Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come,  
the cooing of doves is heard in our land.  
The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.  
Arise, come, my darling; my beautiful one, come with me.”*

Now, THAT'S an Independence Day worth celebrating! My yoke is easy, and my burden light!

And if you listen carefully, and sing along, with our music today, you'll discover another example of Jesus' yoke that brings freedom, breath, life. Jazz is inherently music of freedom; it arose out of the gospels and blues. Jazz is a cry, a breath, in the midst of oppression. Jazz is neither classical music—which arose along with European empires—nor is jazz Christian contemporary music—which I believe is largely expressive of American empire. What our musicians have done for us is to express in music the way Jesus, through the Spirit, makes all things new, strange, filled with life, including mourning.

It is because jazz points us to a third way that we have chosen to feature it in our worship—although other kinds of modern, 20th- and 21st-century music might also express this third way. But jazz is music beyond empire, and we can—through the creativity of our musicians—rediscover through music the freedom that Jesus opens up to us. At the heart of jazz, we find lament, longing, hope, honesty, mourning, dancing. It seems like performance to us only because we take for granted the performance of other worship music. The skill involved in making any music is not something gained easily: it is an intellectual, physical, spiritual challenge—a yoke. But that discipline is made easy and light by the joy it brings: the yoke of Jesus brings freedom, breath, and life.

And in our gospel reading for today, we discover that Jesus was a preacher who was known for his eating and drinking—now THERE's another kind of Independence Day I'm sure we can relate to! John the Baptist, as the gospel points out, was known as an ascetic—a wilderness wanderer. Jesus was called a glutton and a drunkard. And the fact is life is enhanced by good food and beverages—by the fruits of the Earth and the joy of good company. At our house right now, we are celebrating the first fresh potatoes from our garden—and they are delicious. Rheanne made us tacos this past week with jalapenos and potatoes and green onions from the garden, wrapped in crisped tortillas, with a dill and cilantro sauce that made them sing! Jesus frees us to enjoy the gifts of the Earth, their tastes and pleasures.

So, here we are in the wake of another Independence Day. America is beautiful when we can mourn honestly when necessary to mourn, and America is beautiful when we can celebrate with song and dancing: “To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’” Let our generation learn to mourn and to wail at injustice; and let us learn to play the flute and even dance in the marketplaces.

And then, sometimes, it's right and proper to just take it easy—maybe taking in some fireworks from the backyard: “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; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

We can trust this is true, because we live this freedom, this breath, this life—each Sunday. We gather together like this, even from afar, because we need each other; we are stronger together; we find independence in our interdependence.

Or, in the words of Duke Ellington that we will hear Rissel sing for us in our Postlude: “Lord, dear Lord I love; God almighty, God of love, now please look down and see your people through.” May it be so through this season of struggle.

Or, to go from the sublime to the ridiculous, in the immortal words of Todd Rundgren, that I trust will evoke for those of you who are Packers fans the joy of life (and if you’re a Bears fan, I’m truly sorry for you): “I don’t want to work, I want to bang on the drum all day!”

May that be so, too. Amen.

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