
Imagining Freedom

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

As the family and I watched last night's fireworks from the rooftop of our Harlem apartment building, I was finding it difficult to name just why that display didn't move me as it once did. If I'm honest, not even the nostalgia of the day—a day that included epic aerial flyovers, tall ship parades through the Hudson River, Americana music and history, and even star-shaped sugar cookies—was enough to rouse much patriotism.

As you know, this weekend marks a significant milestone: 250 years since the signing of our Declaration of Independence. And I find myself with a mixture of gratitude for this country and also a grave concern for our present historical moment. It is a conflicted time to be an American. If the American project had a relationship status it continues to read: "It's Complicated". While we celebrate our independence as a nation, we still wonder what freedom really means. Who's it actually for? Why is it so scarcely recognizable? And by what measure, and at whose expense, is it determined?

Anniversaries are indeed a time of celebration but also a time for reflection, even examination. We critique and criticize at all because we care so much, and because we care, we cannot sit idly by. MLK Jr. said, "The ultimate tragedy is not the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people."

I want to preface by saying that this is not a political sermon. There are plenty of others, even in this church, who can speak more coherently on the political processes that can get us to "a more perfect union." I'll leave that to these. This, I pray, can stir the imagination as we think on the collective project of human freedom.

We have been grateful for footballers and their traveling supporters who have come to the US for the World Cup these Summer weeks for how the experience has reinvigorated our imagination for the America many of us dream about. Now, I haven't watched all of the matches, though I have watched a good number of them. I also haven't followed all of the inspiring and entertaining storylines, so I want to lean on the following observations from a pastor and writer I follow, Derek Penwell, who posted a helpful summary this week:

"I've felt all of the joy," Derek writes. "The Tartan Army [that is the Scottish Soccer Team supporters] drinking Boston and Miami dry, the Algerians becoming honorary Kansans and the Kansans becoming honorary Algerians, the Koreans and the Mexicans swapping jerseys and shots of tequila, the Norwegians and their rowing, that German song I can't get out of my head, the Bosnians joining a wedding party to celebrate, the Japanese having their minds blown over Texas barbecue, all the English telling us the "European mind simply cannot comprehend _____" (fill in the blank), the warmth of the Iranians, the beautiful enthusiasm of the Congolese, Dutch line-dancing (?), the Swedes trying to smuggle Ranch Dressing in their carry-on, the joy of the Haitians, and the scrappy fire of little Cape Verde" [which I add, is a tiny island, whose soccer team nearly knocked out the reigning champs, Argentina, on Friday night]

The source of my gratitude for my country these days are stories and images such as this. This World Cup has given us what someone called "the world's greatest sleepover with all the cousins we never get to see because our parents hate each other and act like jerks." That's such a perfect metaphor!

We could say, the picture of this has provided us somewhat of a snapshot of heaven. Derek continues by saying: "For a few weeks this country has looked like the thing I keep promising my congregation is coming: the table where nobody gets turned away and we'll turn the water into wine if we run low, the door that doesn't check anyone's passport before entry, the feast God has been setting since long before we ever started deciding who's allowed to eat, and who needs to wait out in the parking lot."

While this feast and celebration is happening on our nation's soil, dreaming has met reality as just in the past couple of days, our nation's leadership has been rolling out plans for the Save America Act which will deny millions of Americans their rights at the voting box. This, after months of learning how our trans

siblings's rights to medical care are being stripped away in many states. And we remember that, as author and activist, Jim Palmer, says: "Freedom is harder than independence." He says, "A nation can declare its independence in a single generation. A human being may spend an entire lifetime becoming free."

This weekend, we have declared yet again our independence with such pomp and precision, yet we still cannot seem to figure out freedom. And we long for the America we know she can be. The pedestal upon which Lady Liberty stands, calls her "Mother of Exiles." That sonnet, written by American poet Emma Lazarus in 1883, is etched on the base to proclaim a promise of freedom for all who set foot on this soil:

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

These are echoes of that original call to rest and freedom. Christ invites all, in the words of Matthew chapter 11: "Come to me, all you who 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."

This is the essence of the gospel. It is what it means to trust in Jesus. This isn't an invitation to a belief but to a relationship, to a way of being in the world. And we need a little lightness. We need a reminder that there is another way of being, a new wisdom, calling out the usual ways of gaining and keeping money, position, and power. It can be exhausting. Jesus says, "send me your tired, those who are tempest-tossed. There is rest."

When you become yoked to Jesus, you share in not only his wisdom and rest, but you share in his compassion for others. Like Lady Liberty, you hold out a lamp signaling to those around you that they may enter for sanctuary. You become an open door, beaming with light. When he says, "my burden is light", we can think of that as meaning "the burden is not heavy" but also what you are taking on is light itself. Showing up in the dark spaces for others. Being a presence to come along someone who just needs a guiding hand. Light is not

heavy. But it does have a significant purpose. What an easy burden, to bear the light of God! To lift your lamp beside the golden door!

As we come away from the weekend of America 250, I don't believe God calls us to be independent but rather interdependent. We don't need clearer lines of division and greater separation, we need to be reminded of our interdependence upon one another—that freedom will always be relational. It can become so tiresome keeping up. May we take up Jesus's invitation to come and rest. May we embody this burden of light for others. Amen.