

### **Pastor Roy's sermon from July 6, 2014**

Independence Day. July 4<sup>th</sup>. In my childhood, we would travel to my cousin's house, enjoy a cookout, and walk up the hill to the edge of the parking lot of the Shopping center where we watched the fireworks. Sometimes I would stay for a couple days before being picked up by my dad on the way home from work to return home.

Independence Day is a celebration that we have a role in the making of the laws which govern our lives. We often think about freedom on the Fourth of July. But freedom is a slippery word. What's free for me might be imprisonment for someone else. What makes a good law in my opinion might be a crushing burden to someone else. We do well to think about the nature of freedom from time to time.

Luther and Lutheran pastors often talk about law and grace. Law is the command to do this or that. To not do this or that. Law threatens judgment, punishment, rejection, the disappointment and wrath of God. It depends upon our fear of getting caught doing the wrong thing or not doing the right thing. Grace is forgiveness, new beginnings with brand new options, a fresh start. In the Scriptures we find a balance between law and grace. Both can lead to freedom. Freedom not necessarily to do what we please, but freedom to live with courage and compassion and fulfillment. Freedom to practice self-discipline so that we can be truly free.

Luther suggested that no sermon is complete unless it contains a proclamation of the gospel of God's mercy. Yet he also felt strongly that sermons should have law in them too, because of our need to be reminded of harsh realities and our need for deep humility. Jesus' teachings contain both commands and complete grace.

The grace of God is evident in Psalm 145, "The Lord is loving to everyone and his compassion is over all his works." From the Matthew 11 reading, Jesus says, "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.

John the Baptist emphasized faithfulness and warned people of God's judgment. Jesus emphasized compassion and welcomed all people. He spent time with people, listening to and offering wisdom. He saved his stern warnings for the people who should have known better. Two different styles. And the people would say that John the Baptist was crazy and that Jesus was a party animal. Yet many benefitted from the messages and styles of both. It goes to show that critiques say as much about the one speaking as the intended subject.

Jesus offers, "Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." He is saying that both ways are needed. Both are true. And it all depends on the openness of each person, of each group of people.

For it is true that the mercy of God is profound and enduring. It is also true that every behavior, every thought, every decision, every response has a whole set of consequences. Sometimes we are aware of them, sometimes we are not aware. But life is not based on our awareness, what we think or believe, no matter how cherished and strongly held these thoughts are. Reality does not depend on our opinion. The commands of the wisdom of God and the complete compassion of God are two sides of the same coin. Different views, different ways, but clearly, the same reality.

Perhaps law, command, and punishment is the Scripture's way of pointing out that reality consists of a lot more than our personal opinion, as much as we cherish and believe our beliefs. Creation does not bow to us. Yet these do not teach us that the life is simply about pleasing the One who has the ultimate power. No, the foundation of the commands of God are the Gospel of grace and mercy and peace. We listen carefully to God's law of mercy and live humbly in response.

Isn't that why Jesus offers, "I will give you rest, take my yoke, learn, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. My yoke is easy and my burden is light." The key, I believe, is the humility part.

Is not humility an open mind to God's Spirit? Is it not leaving the door ajar for something new, that my enemy might actually be my best friend in disguise? That maybe we have much, much more in common than our differences suggest. That perhaps the key to my salvation in the mercy of God is found as I make room in my heart and spirit for my neighbor, especially the one I would prefer to ignore or hate. Perhaps even the neighbor who is me.

My yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Again, the recurring theme here is prayer. Not prayer as spending a little time asking for things or seeking to be free of our anxieties, but prayer as the whole direction of our lives. Prayer as breathing. Prayer as eating. Prayer as conversation. Prayer as sleep. Prayer as life.

In this lifestyle of learning, listening, waiting for God's Spirit, we can come to live into freedom, and love, and humility. In this way of living we learn to take up the yoke which is easy, and the burden which is light.

We will never arrive, but always be on the way, open to compassion, to love, and to the life of listening.

Thanks be to God. Amen.