

**Sermon**  
**Proper 9, Year A**  
**July 6, 2008**  
*by The Rev. Norman Bray*

May the Word of God be spoken, may the Word of God be heard. May the Word of God be understood through Jesus Christ who is the Word.

This weekend is the time that we in this country celebrate our independence. These last three days have been full of picnics and fireworks, parades, going to the beach, and resting. Independence is something that is very important to us, we value individual achievement, individual accomplishments. We used to say things like “he pulled himself by his own bootstraps” meaning that someone had achieved wealth or status on their own, without relying on assistance from others. That is who we are, independent Americans who are proud of our freedoms, freedoms that our ancestors fought to secure. That said, how do the Scriptures for this week fit for us. Jesus says “take my yoke upon you.” Usually when we talk about yokes we are talking about the yoke of slavery, which does not sit well with independence. How do we find our way through this quandary?

Paul’s letter to the Romans has some help for us I think. When Paul wrote this letter he was at the top of his game, the very high point of his life. He was between 55-65 years old, a Christian for twenty or thirty years, a mature Christian

who had been thrown into prison, stoned, and beaten. He had spoken powerfully before kings and government officials. He had written letters to several of the churches, letters that circulated all through the Christian community. And yet we hear Paul saying “I don’t get it. I do not understand why I do the things that I hate. I will not do the things that I want to do but instead, I do the things that I do not want to do.” We have listened to Paul’s letters, we know that Paul was a good man, a holy and prayerful man and yet he found that he was not able, on his own, to control his actions. On his own, Paul fell always into sin. In this letter, when Paul talks about sin he is not talking about a sin, he is speaking of sin, the evil that is in the world, working to cause us to harm ourselves and damage our relationship with God. Paul is engaged in a struggle, a constant battle, if you will, with the forces of sin in this world. I believe that this is one of the marks of someone who is mature in their faith, that they are aware that they are constantly struggling against sin. This is the mark of a true Christian who lives in the real world and has real feelings and a real awareness of their own selves, that they know that they are always struggling with sin.

But, you might ask, how can this be so difficult? God gave Moses the Ten Commandments, all we have to do is watch our step, don’t break the rules and we are fine, no worries. Karl Barth said that “sin is not confined to the evil things that we do.” That is a sobering thought, the idea that we can be in sin even if we do not do anything evil. One way that happens is when we allow evil to be done in our names, for instance when our government acts in an immoral manner. When two million die in the Sudan because of war and starvation, that is sin.

Genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia, that is sin. Thousands of tsunami victims being denied relief because of a government that is uncertain of its own security, that is sin. Don't think that I am saying that the United States government is evil or that the government of Indonesia is evil, I am not saying that. What I am saying is that sin is in the world and that sometimes it is our sin, even if it is not our own actions.

Sin is always there, waiting to pervert even our most prayerful efforts. When you were in school you read about the Crusades, Holy Wars to free the Holy Land from the infidel. There are surely other motives for those wars but what was on most peoples minds is that they were doing a holy thing. They were going to kill people for God, what could be more holy than that? Can you imagine? What about Paul himself when he was still Saul of Tarsus? He was persecuting Christians, throwing them in jail, having them stoned in the name of Yahweh. He intended to do good but what he was doing was sin. In 1862 a man named Richard Jordan Gatling, a physician and inventor, witnessed the horrors of the American Civil War, men maimed and crippled and killed and he decided to do something about it. He decided to make a weapon so horrible that no one would ever consider going to war again. He would make war so awful that it would be unthinkable. He invented the Gatling Gun, a six barreled weapon that could fire 200 bullets per minute, the ancestor of the modern machine gun. No longer would a soldier have to stop and reload after every shot, they just turned the crank and bullets spewed out. His intention was to end killing but what happened is that he just made killing easier.

So, what do we do? We cannot resist sin on our own; it seems that no matter what we do it is going to be turned to evil. How can we deal with this? The answer is that we cannot do it on our own, we need help and Jesus in today's Gospel makes us the offer that we cannot, that we dare not refuse. "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 do not have much experience with yokes around here but they are still used in much of the world. A yoke is a device that is put onto an ox or some other animal that allows the animal to pull plows or wagons, or tree stumps or whatever you need pulled. It allows us to utilize the strength of the animal. In many cases, 2 animals were yoked together in tandem or in a team to share the work, to share the burden. When you want to train a young animal you might yoke it to an older, more experienced one so that the young one could learn from the more experienced one. Sometimes the yoke doesn't even touch the young one but they grow into it. What Jesus is offering us is a help, someone to share a load that we cannot bear on our own. The yoke of Jesus is what Paul was talking about when he said "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" He recognized that he was not independent, but rather dependent on Jesus to help him do those things that he knew that he should do. By ourselves, even when our motives are on target, sin seems strong enough to destroy and yet sin cannot exist if we abide in Jesus Christ, if we are dependent on Jesus rather than independent. Peter Gomes, the chaplain at Harvard for the last 30 or so years says that knowing that we are

not in control is the beginning of self-control. By surrendering our lives, our souls and bodies to Jesus Christ we will have the help that we need to resist sin, to resist the evil in this world. By becoming dependent on Jesus we become independent of sin and that is something that we can celebrate for a lot longer than a three day weekend.

Happy Independence Day!