

July 5, 2020 – Romans 7:14-25a & Matthew 11:25-30<sup>1</sup>

Independence Day is generally regarded as a restful holiday. That's not true of all holidays. Thanksgiving entails mountains of cooking and preparation. Christmas can be absolutely frantic with gift giving and family gatherings.

But Independence Day is restful. It's a day to fire up the grill, crack open a cold one, and chat with your family and friends. A day to enjoy the summer weather and relax in the comfort of your backyard. It's a restful holiday.

But what exactly are we resting from? Work, most likely. The day-to-day grind of whatever we do to pay the bills. Or, if that's no longer relevant to us, it's at least a day to rest from the ordinary. To take a break from household chores and the same four walls we see every day. To meet up with the kids and grandkids for fireworks and pool parties.

This is the kind of rest we are drawn to. The kind of rest that we think we need. After a long, hard week, we crave a day to sleep in and abandon our normal responsibilities. But is this the kind of rest that Jesus promises us in our Gospel lesson today? "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*" Come to me, and I will give you barbecue and fireworks and a day free from anything resembling work. Is that was Jesus is offering?

I think you know the answer to that. No, of course not! But you may not know why. Why isn't that the rest that Jesus offers? It seems pretty great, after all. We certainly cling to it every chance we get.

To answer this question, let's take a closer look at the sort of person to whom Jesus promises to give this rest: "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden.*" When we hear these words, we easily understand the labor part. We understand the work.

Human beings, even before the fall into sin, were always creatures of work work. From the moment Adam was created, he had work given to him. Genesis 2 says, "*The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.*" Adam was a farmer and he had work to do.

Just as all of us do. We work the ground, work our jobs, work at school, work for our families, work to take care of the house. Work, work, work. It's what we do all our lives.

Everyone works. Everyone labors. Everyone feels weary with physical exhaustion sometimes. But Jesus promises to give rest not just to those who work, but to those who are heavy laden. To those who are burdened. Burdened in spirit. Burdened in conscience. Burdened by guilt. To those who need rest for their souls.

That's what it means to be heavy laden – to know the work that the Law of God demands you to do and, at the same time, to know you've been unable to do it. To know what the Law demands of you as a husband or wife, a father or mother, a son or daughter, a employee or employer, a friend or neighbor. And to know daily that you have not managed to do the work the Law demands, no matter how hard you've tried. This is what it means to be heavy laden.

Because you know what the Law of God demands. And even more than that, you know that the Law of God is good and wise and is nothing less than the will of God. And so you know that when you break that Law, you are rejecting God's will for you. You are rejecting God's authority over you. You are sinning. You know your sin.

This is why Jesus promises to give you rest. Because you know that your work falls short of the will of God, and as a result your spirit is burdened. Your conscience is burdened. Burdened with sin.

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Rev. Gregory Truwe for his article "The Lord Who Gives Rest," found in Concordia Pulpit Resources Vol 30, Part 3, from which portions of this sermon were adapted. All content was used by permission.

In these simple words of Gospel, Jesus promises to give rest to those whose consciences are plagued by what they've done and by what they've left undone. He promises to give rest to those who know they justly deserve his temporal and eternal punishment. He promises to give rest to those who work and labor, not just at their jobs, but in all their vocations of life, day after day, but whose consciences are burdened by their sin.

Paul writes about this exact phenomenon in our Epistle lesson today. "*I do not understand my own actions,*" he writes. "*For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.*" Paul knew the Law. And Paul knew that the Law is good. Like you, Paul knew that, try as he might, he could not keep the Law.

Paul goes on: "*For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.*"

Clearly, Paul wants to do the Law of God. And clearly, he finds he cannot do it. The evil he doesn't want to do seems to be what he keeps on doing. Until finally, as a man whose conscience is burdened with his sin, he has no choice but to say, "*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*"

That is the plea of a man who has labored and is heavy laden. It's the very sort of person to whom Jesus promises to give rest. Not simply a person who works at a job. Not simply a person who needs a day off. But a person who knows that he deserves nothing but temporal and eternal punishment because of his work. Because his work has been so sinful. It has been such a failure in God's eyes.

It is to that exact sort of person that Jesus declares, "*Take my yoke upon you.*" Take my work as your work. Take the work I am doing to fulfill my Father's will and have it as the work that you are doing. Take my life as your own. Let it be credited to you so that you might rest and not live in fear.

For that is my yoke. The Law is my burden to pay so that you might learn from me that I am gentle and lowly in heart, and so that you might find rest for your souls. Take my yoke, the work I am doing on your behalf, the work I did on the cross, and have it as your own. My yoke is easy. My burden is light. Because it's given as a gift to you.

"*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" Those are the words of a man who has found more than the rest that comes from a holiday. More than a simple barbecue with family or day of relaxation with friends. Those are the words of a man who has felt the burden of his sin lifted.

And those are our words in the Divine Service. That's why we gather here. This church service isn't about adding one more burden to your life. One more work that you need to do perfectly. Or else feel ashamed that you overslept that one time and didn't make it to church.

No, this is a place to have your burdens lifted. To hear me proclaim to you with the voice of Christ himself, "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen." To hear me proclaim to you with the voice of Christ himself, "Take and eat, this is my body, given for the forgiveness of all your sins. Take and drink, this is my blood, shed for the forgiveness of all your sins."

This is a place where you can unload all the guilt of your sin on the shoulders of Christ. And take up the yoke of his work, done for you. It is the reason why we will approach the Lord's Supper saying, "We give You thanks for the redemption You have prepared for us through Jesus Christ." And why we will leave the Lord's Supper saying, "We give thanks to You, almighty God, that You have refreshed us through this salutary gift."

Because, like St Paul, when we see this body of death delivered by the work of Jesus Christ, we can't help but declare, "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" Thanks be to God that, by His death and resurrection, he has given us rest for our souls. Amen.