

Trinity Church
July 6, 2008

8 Pentecost, Celebrating Independence Day
RCL, Year A, Proper 9

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

Lord, your yoke is easy and your burden is light. Help us to learn from you, for you are gentle, and humble of heart. In you we find rest for our souls. Amen.

In case you haven't heard, our daughter Elizabeth (we call her Effie), is marrying Ryan Jerke this summer. Of the billions of creatures in God's vast creation, they have found each other, and they are in love. When Effie revealed to us that she was dating Ryan, and that she thought their relationship was in the "serious phase," I asked, "Well, Effie, how did you and Ryan meet?" Now, Effie has had other "serious phase" relationships with men she met in college or in graduate school, social environments in which you expect people to meet new friends and develop new relationships. But when I asked her about Ryan, she was hesitant to answer. Finally she said, "I met him online through a computer-based dating service." She felt she had to defend herself. "I have been working so hard at the law firm, I don't have time to be that social beyond my friends. I let the computer do the work, and it did. Ryan is the kind of person I have been waiting to meet. He is a gift of grace from God to me."

The Scripture readings today say in several ways that, as humans, it is hard for us to do it all; it is very difficult indeed to get it right. That it is impossible, in fact, without God and God's grace working in us and others.

Abraham's servant must have felt the pressure when Abraham said, "Isaac and I are too busy here; you go and find Isaac a wife." "What am I?" the servant must have asked himself. "I'm no computer dating service. How am I going to find Isaac a wife? Who am I to determine the happiness of others?" He knew that this was a task that must include the wisdom and grace of God. So, when he arrived at the well of Abraham's clan, he prayed to God, "Let the woman who comes to the well, who is charitable enough to give me and my camels water, let her be the one Isaac has been waiting to meet. Let your compassion, charity, respect and love in her, O God, lead me in the right way." Even as he was praying, Rebekah appeared.

The burden is heavy, the task impossible, the chance of failure too great when it all depends on you alone, even when your only desire is to please God. But when you share the yoke with God, take Christ's yoke upon you, learn from him, accept and rely on his grace, the burden is easier, the task lighter, grace is revealed.

In the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul is depressed, or so it seems. "I do not understand my own actions," he writes. He goes on to confess that while he wants to do what is good and right, and he tries hard, sin is close at hand, and he misses the mark. He even does things he knows are wrong. "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" he asks in despair. Like Abraham's servant of old, Paul turns to God, and to Paul's Lord and savior, Jesus Christ. "If the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you." What Paul is saying to himself is that when he puts the burdens of life on himself, he becomes weary and depressed and overcome with failure; when he accepts Jesus' invitation to "take his yoke upon you," when he accepts God's Spirit and grace at work with him, then the task is bearable, the burden is light, and grace is at work and God's love brings life and healing.

So, Isaac finds Rebekah, a gift of God's grace, and God's grace saves Paul from despair; but what does this have to say to us as a nation as we celebrate 232 years of independence this weekend? What this says to me is how hard it is, and how dangerous it is, when a society, when a nation, any nation, tries to go it alone, when a nation relies on itself. Sin is so close at hand, as Paul would say. Going it alone builds walls between people, to keep East Germany from West, keep Israelis and Palestinians apart, keep Mexico and the US separate. Going it alone breeds pride and unhealthy competition, and we do things we know are wrong just to protect ourselves. The burden becomes heavy, too heavy to bear, and we think there is nowhere to turn. We become weary of trying to do good and falling short.

Just as individuals find new life when they accept God's grace, so we as a nation receive life when we admit that we must rely on God's forgiveness and grace. That is Jesus' invitation. "Take my yoke upon you; learn from me; be gentle and humble of heart, and you will find your way. My yoke is easy; my burden is light."

"I keep giving you these invitations," Jesus says. "In every generation I call to you. I play the flute, but you do not dance. I wail, but you do not mourn. I send prophets like John the Baptist or Martin Luther King, and you say, he has a demon; you think that I am ridiculous and pay no attention. I try to help you feed and care for the homeless, and you reject my helpers. All I can do is say again and again: Come to me ... Come to me." To our nation, God says the same. You need me. Come to me. Learn from me. For I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest.