

14th Sunday in Ordinal Time Fourth of July Weekend 2020

Parish of Holy Cross – St. John the Baptist
Midtown Manhattan



A simple face mask.

A reminder of our risk for disease. A symbol of our “dis-ease” with one another as a people.

How have we made our way to this disheartening place?

In today’s gospel, Jesus offers us the image of a yoke. His yoke, he reminds us, is easy. A way of life creative of rest. Other yokes generating heavy burdens and strenuous labor.

May I ask you: What’s hanging around your neck these days? My surmise is that many of us, likely the majority of us, wear more than one yoke. Perhaps, a good many more. What are you tugging along with you these days. Family concerns? Financial worries? Employment fears? Covid-19 anxieties? Bouts of loneliness? Confusion and apprehension over the current state of our social unrest? Awkwardness and hesitancy to speak directly to the question of our day – racial hostilities as consequence of the tragic institution of chattel slavery? Each of us can offer other possible yokes of our burden. I invite you to take a moment and consider your own.

On this Fourth of July weekend, we do well to consider how yoked we have become – individually and as a nation – to arrangements, assumptions, actions and antagonisms that hinder and destabilize our historic challenge to “build a more perfect union.” In celebrating Independence Day, we do well to reflect upon the *Declaration of Independence* written in 1776:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Eleven years later, in 1787, the United States’ Constitution was adopted. Its preamble:

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the

Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

These noble aspirations, of course, were a project to be undertaken. A noble, yet flawed project. The U.S. Constitution of 1787 included an amendment calling for black slaves to be counted as “three-fifths” of the equivalent number of white men for the purposes of representation in Congress. It was only in 1863 that the *Emancipation Proclamation* called for the abolition of slavery. And yet, another 6 years would pass before black men were afforded the right to vote.

As for women, white and black, they would have to wait until the adoption of the 19th amendment to the Constitution in 1920 before they could exercise their right to vote as citizens of the noble project launched 144 years earlier.

Of course, as Roman Catholics here in the United States of America, we also know of the hurdles, suspicions and prejudice faced by our forebears who made their way to these shores in various waves of immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The point here is that *forming a more perfect union* is an ongoing task that demands commitment and, as often as not, a change of heart. Many are the yokes in our history as a people that had to be smashed in order for us to live into our creed as a nation. As disciples of Christ, we bring a unique gift to this task of *forming a more perfect union* – shedding yokes of burden by accepting the yoke of Jesus – meek and humble of heart. That is the measure of our health as a society – our solicitude for the meek and humble, the vulnerable and forgotten.

Jesus’ wisdom is not the possession of the wise and strong, rather it is a gift on offer to the humble. Those willing to undergo a change of heart, willing to be numbered among the little ones. A wisdom gleaned by the poet Emma Lazarus in her ageless piece: *The New Colossus*. A wisdom etched on the Statue of Liberty that proudly beckons new arrivals in the harbor of this great city of New York:

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “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-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*

What yoke are you prepared to wear around your neck?