



Jesus said, "Come to me all you who are weary and 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." In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When it comes to accepting the gentle yoke of Jesus and living a Christian life, one of the most beautiful books that has ever been written comes to us from Henri Nouwen. In *Road to Daybreak*, he tells us the story of going to live in an intentional Christian community in Richmond Hill, Ontario. There, disabled adults live alongside their typically developing peers.

They share their lives together in ways that are grounded in the Gospel of Jesus. Nouwen decided to live among these people because he was a follower of Jesus, and until his death in 1996, he lived in community with them for a decade. There is this one episode in the book that has always spoken to me because the man involved shares his name with our son.

The story is called Danny's Prayer, and it speaks to some of our most profound hopes for the world that Jesus lived and died for. During evening prayer, Nouwen writes, "We sang simple songs, and we listened to Danny, one of the men from Cork, who, with great difficulty, read from a children's book about Jesus, and then we prayed."

Danny said, "I love you, Jesus. I do not reject you even when I get nervous once in a while, even when I get confused. I love you with my arms, my legs, my head, my heart. I love you, and I do not reject you, Jesus. I know that you love me, that you love me so much. I love you too, Jesus.' As he prayed," Nouwen continues, "I looked at his beautiful, gentle face, and I saw, without any veil or cover, his agony as well as his love."

Who would not respond to a prayer like that? Well, as we live out our lives, we come to know many people who would not answer this prayer. Some of us are too mean. Others are preoccupied with their own problems. But God has answered this prayer. God is the one who hears the people of Israel groaning under their burdens.

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God is the one who sends Jesus to shatter the bonds of death. God sends us Jesus to show us how to love, and God invites us, all of us, to love each other. With our arms, our legs, our heads, and our hearts, God invites us to love each other just like Jesus did and does. The Eucharist is one place where we catch sight of God's vision for the world.

Here, the Spirit of Jesus gathers His body from every family, language, tribe, and nation. Here, Jesus shows us how to love. His church exists for outsiders and the most vulnerable among us. It exists for all of us. The church exists for those who do not yet belong. When Jesus reigns as our Lord, we become less greedy and more generous.

His love overcomes our divisions. Strangers learn to live as neighbors. Enemies are reconciled. It all comes back to the message of the prophets. "I have given you as a light to the nations," says the Lord, "that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." A couple of months ago, on the fourth Sunday of Easter, I preached to you about a famous poem that is inscribed at the base of the Statue of Liberty.

I noted that Lady Liberty is what Karl Barth, the Swiss theologian who helped shape the church's witness against the Nazi regime, once called a secular parable of the truth. I went on to say that many of our nation's founding promises are aspirational in character. But at the end of the day, whether we keep these promises or not, Jesus will.

Jesus will gather all people to himself, for he has opened a door that no one can shut for all who long to breathe free. "Come unto me," he says, "all ye that travail and are heavy laden. Come unto me, and I will give you rest."

Many of the patriotic hymns we sing on the 4th of July are also secular parables of the truth. God speaks to them. They point us to our highest ideals, which we imperfectly realize. America is what our founders called an experiment in ordered liberty. As Americans, we participate in an unfinished revolution, and whether or not we prove worthy of our ideals, God will certainly bring them about.

O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain. For purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain. America, America, God shed His grace on thee and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea. Of all the national songs in our hymnal, America the Beautiful may be the very best one, and that's because it is a prayer of thanksgiving that renews our deepest hopes for our country.

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The first stanza begins by evoking the beauty of the American landscape and the abundance of our agriculture, and then we ask God to shed grace upon us and bring us together as neighbors. This weekend, as we give thanks for 250 years of our independence, we should honor the many sacrifices that people have made to protect and expand the liberties we enjoy, and we should remember how fragile and imperfect our democracy is.

Freedom requires both vigilance and virtue. Today, we recommit ourselves to God's beautiful dream for our country and for all people everywhere. That brings us to the second stanza of *America the Beautiful*.

"O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife, who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life! America, America, God mend thine every flaw, confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law."

Back in 1787, right after the Constitutional Convention, a prominent lady of Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, is said to have asked Ben Franklin what kind of government the new country would have. "A republic," he said, "if you can keep it."

We live in a deeply divided age. We might be tempted to date this fact to recent events, but the seeds of our divisions go further back. At a minimum, we can date them to Watergate, to Vietnam, to other social conflicts of the '60s and '70s, but they really go further back than that, to the Civil War and Reconstruction, to the Revolution itself and the debates that followed it.

How easily we forget the fierce debates about our Constitution and Bill of Rights. It's not the first time in our history that politicians and ordinary people have held sharply different visions for our future. Nowadays, each half of the country seems convinced the other half has lost its mind. Civil discourse eludes us, and there is a real possibility of political violence.

We have forgotten what it means to put our country first over party and the common good over our personal points of view. Again and again, our founders warned us about these great dangers, and they stressed the need for virtuous citizens to protect the integrity of the newborn republic. So they wrote our Constitution to restrain both the vices of the powerful and the passions of the mob.

In his farewell discourse to the nation, George Washington warned us about the dangers posed by party spirit to what he called public liberty. In particular, he warned

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us about the tendency of political parties to, quote, "Make the public administration the mirror of ill-concerted and incongruous projects of faction rather than the organ of consistent and wholesome plans digested by common councils and modified by mutual interests."

That was the vision of the founders. As the heirs of Washington and the other founders, we should be on guard against the dangers posed by pervasive corruption and the breakdown of civil discourse. Even the best-devised systems of government require vigilance to preserve and perfect them. We are not alone in our shortcomings.

In the Old Testament, the people of God rebelled against God's authority and asked for a king so that they could be like the other nations. But even when God gave them what they asked for, they continued to break faith with God and to exploit their most vulnerable neighbors. In our lesson this morning from the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul speaks to us about human bondage.

Despite the deepest longings of our hearts, we find ourselves caught in a system of violence and sin. As St. Augustine of Hippo, in many ways the founding father of Christianity in the West, once observed, "We live in the earthly city that was founded by Cain, and the law of this city is the lust for domination. At the same time, we are citizens of the city of God, and the law of that city is the love of God and neighbor."

"Who shall deliver us from this body of death?" Paul asks. It is the cry of his heart, "Who shall deliver us from this body of death?" In the end, it is Jesus who can, for He is the one who lives out God's love.

Moment by moment, He lives this love out completely. At the cost of His own life, He lives it out here in the earthly city under the same conditions that we do. By His death and resurrection, Jesus breaks the reign of death in our world. He changes our hearts by giving us His Spirit, and He gives us power to live as God's children. Who would not be inspired by the ideals of our country?

Who could fail to be inspired by our Declaration of Independence? Who would not long for all people to enjoy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness? Who would not want all people to share in the good things of life and to be able to provide for themselves and their neighbors with dignity? Ultimately, though, we are also citizens of that kingdom where Jesus reigns as king. Our allegiance to him leads us to live in solidarity with any who are mistreated or oppressed, even when that's inconvenient or unpopular.

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Too often in America today, we abuse our freedom to do whatever we want to, but true freedom means loving God above all things and loving our neighbors as ourselves. The real torch of liberty is the Holy Spirit, God's own love burning in our hearts. The Spirit of Jesus gives us the courage to risk everything for other people.

"O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years, thine alabaster cities gleam undimmed by human tears. America, America, God shed his grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea, and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea." That is our prayer for our country today.

Living as siblings, as neighbors, as friends, that is what freedom is for. Amen