

I've had a dialogue running through my head for most of the week. The words of Paul, "For the desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability" have been speaking to the words of Jesus, "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Actually, I guess it's really more of a trialogue (turns out that's actually a word) between the words of Paul – exhorting his hearers to understand our relationship to the law, the words of Jesus – encouraging us to find rest in the reality of the Messiah and accept the yoke of discipleship, and the celebration of a major national anniversary while I don't feel much like celebrating.

In the current political climate, there is much effort expended to find deep connection between the Kingdom of God – a Christian worldview – with the entirety of American history. Connections are elaborated and exaggerated everywhere. I see the policies and stances of those who profess this Christian worldview and wonder how they reconcile what they say and do with the words of Jesus and the words of Paul.

Mike and I spent no small amount of time trying to decide how we would reflect the celebration of this weekend in our liturgy today. We're not celebrating a civic holiday in this service, but we are certainly gathering to worship God in light of what we are celebrating in our communal life. We can't ignore this moment in time as we gather for worship. It is a part of what we do as much as it is part of who we collectively are as a nation.

Who we are as a nation. Maybe that's the actual third party in this trialogue I've been experiencing. So many folks are pondering that identity today. Who are we as a nation? What were we formed to be? What is the ideal toward which we strive? How do we define what it means to be a citizen of the United States of America?

I'm not going to answer that question. Because as much as some would want to argue that our identity as Christians is virtually synonymous with our identity as American, it simply isn't true. We can be, and many certainly are, both American and Christian. But they are **not** synonymous. You cannot define one with the other.

In a society that also struggled with the separation of church and state, Luther wrote extensively to clarify that we are, first and foremost as Christians, citizens of the kingdom of God. That bears fruit in our citizenship within a state, but our identity – our **life** belongs first to God and is centered in the gospel. Who we are as disciples is not defined by civil laws and declarations, our identity comes in the waters of baptism. Our identity comes at the cross.

Bringing those two realities together – learning how to exist in the space between those two identities is some of what Paul was speaking to when he lamented that, "the desire to do the good

lies close at hand, but not the ability.” Paul was working to define our relationship to the law and how the cross and resurrection have reframed our identity, but the reality of our sinfulness is that we can see the truth of grace so clearly and it feels like it is right **there**, so close at hand, and yet we mess it up.

We don’t do what God asks us to do. Instead, we wrap ourselves in worldly power, prestige, and identity and turn the Kingdom of God into faith-based nationalism...built not on God’s grace, but on how we want the power of privilege and the conviction that God is on our side. We sing and proclaim, “God bless America,” not because we’re praying for God to bless all people, but because we want God to endorse our particular political views. We want God to be on our side.

As Paul says, we “do not do the good [we] want, but the evil [we] do not want is what [we] do.”

And Jesus says, “knock it off.” Okay, those weren’t his exact words, but I think it’s a pretty good interpretation of what is happening as he offers an opportunity and an explanation of what the yoke of discipleship means as we continue to struggle.

“I will give you rest,” Jesus says. In the ongoing conversation about discipleship he’s having with the crowd, Jesus offers a way to do the good that God called us to embody. It’s not based on the power of this world. It’s not based on strength or really any part of who we are. The rest we find is in **trusting what Jesus has done** to create a new kingdom.

The rest we experience when we take on the yoke of discipleship is in trusting that God is at work and that we are not in charge of what God is doing. We can continue to build a community that works towards our ideals not because we’re earning our way into God’s love by conquering the world, but because we respond to God’s love by **showing** it to the world. By helping our friends, our neighbors, and our enemies, we reveal God’s Kingdom in ways that are life-giving, in ways that are transformative, in ways that bring rest to our world.

Paul speaks to his community and to us about how hard it is to understand and trust in God’s grace. Jesus speaks to the crowd and to us about what it means to rest in God’s grace instead of making the kingdom about us. A celebration of 250 years of community building speaks to how we continue to live together and trust what God is doing.

God speaks into our lives and reminds us once again that we follow an amazing, life-giving God who offers us rest when we need it and hope when we’ve lost it. Are we listening? Amen.