

It's the Fourth of July weekend, and in light of today's lection, a holiday staple comes to mind: Bruce Springsteen. The Boss, one of America's greatest troubadours, wrote a catchy little anthem called *Born in the U.S.A.*, with a repeated chorus of: "Born in the U.S.A., I was born in the U.S.A., I was born in the U.S.A., I was born in the U.S.A." Because of the song's upbeat tempo, and because of Springsteen's often mumbled style, and because we rarely listen closely to the lyrics of catchy tunes, many forget that this is a song of protest; a lament for the atrocities of the Vietnam War, and of the economic despair of rust-belt families in the 1970s and 1980s. The Reagan campaign famously played this as a celebration song at rallies, the first in a long line of politicians on both sides of the aisles to misinterpret or re-purpose protest songs in counterproductive ways. The powers and principalities often dance in the midst of the people's lamentations, and they lament when the people find joy.

Jesus grieves a generation, both in his day and in ours, that refuses to see, or hear, or recognize, or listen to what's in front of it. The nations longed for a traditionalist, a non-consumerist, a purist, but when John came proclaiming God's kingdom the people said he was too traditional, and too countercultural, and too pure for their liking. The nations longed for a prophet, somebody that had personality, and that they could drink a beer with, and that was a justice candidate, but when Jesus preached God's kingdom and offered God's banquet, he did it with too much hospitality, and too much neighborliness, and without any regard for boundaries. Somehow, someway, the human-made systems of this world come with a built-in fickleness, a grass-is-greener-on-the-other-side approach to every relationship, and an inability to receive and recognize what is pure, and good, and decent, and lasting, and divine.

Jesus feels the weight of this dilemma, and like everyone of us, he expresses a frustration for those neighbors that never seem to "get it." "Lord, help me," he says, "You've put me around a bunch of people who are too smart for their own good!" But what's different about Jesus than most of us, is that Jesus doesn't seek out a coworker, or a relative, or a store clerk, and spend a half-hour choir-preaching about the stubbornness and close-mindedness of his too-smart-for-their-own-good neighbors. In the midst of this heaviness, in the midst of this arghh, in the midst of this tension with a humanity he's wholly invested in, Jesus offers a prayer of gratitude to God: Thank you, Mamma, thank you, Daddy, thank

you Gracious One, that you choose to reveal yourself not to those who are wise to worldly things, but instead to those who drink in your presence like infants.”

Another Fourth of July trigger: watermelon!!!

This past week, after several unsuccessful tries, our family shared our first ripe watermelon of the season. Divinity in a green a cylinder – a sweet, cool, refreshing, sticky mess!!! Jacqueline and I are always eager for our daughters to take an interest in new fruits and vegetables, and we were especially pleased that Mary Allen and Lucy found watermelon to be satisfactory.

Our delight in their newfound delight was soon tempered. As the girls squealed their yums and smacked their lips, our kitchen table was soon covered with a six-foot circumference of pink, sticky liquid, our clean floor was covered in slimy black and white seeds, our daughters faces, hair-dos, and fingers were showered with watermelon pulp. This is what we call a little problem in our household, not a big one. But as big sister and little sister marveled at their new discovery, mamma and daddy fretted that another hour of cleanup was in store before a restful evening could begin. Eating watermelon as an adult is a whole lot less world-changing than eating it as an infant. Rather than being captivated by our newfound senses, we often spend too much time worrying about logistics and delivery.

What Jesus is telling us this morning is that we spend way too much time seeking to become wise to systems that will never fully satisfy us. The reason we rebuke traditionalists who give us tradition, and partiers who bring the party, is that it's not tradition nor hospitality that we seek. It's control. We want to do more, and be more, and see more, and live more, and have more, and we want to do it all on our terms. Yes, the gospel truth is nice: jubilee, and love, and manna, and peace all sound like worthy pursuits. But the gospel truth also sounds like a lot of work; it sounds like we'd have to give up the things that give us security, that make us wise in this world. We want a watermelon without a mess; we want to dance to a rock ballad without having to think about justice; we want gospel truth without having to do gospel witness and work.

Caesar's world teaches us to zig, when God's world asks us to zag. Caesar's world asks to grow up, to gain credentials, to be informed, and to stay on guard; God's world asks us to have the curiosity and wonder of infants, tells us we're already credentialed, reminds us we have plenty to keep learning, and tells us that God's got us.

When we insist on zigging, when we insist on being grown, and credentialed, and informed, and guarded, the world is a heavy, heavy place. We climb to our mountaintops, often exerting more energy in remaining king of the mountain than in the climb itself. And such pursuits – those of protection and isolation – can be soul-emptying.

So Jesus offers an easy yoke and a light burden. This doesn't mean discipleship is without effort, or without drama, or without hardship. But discipleship offers a rest and a purpose for the soul.

I'm not here to condemn capitalism, or democracy in their entirety – I'm too invested in both of them to authentically do so. But we do live in systems with finite rewards. I've yet to meet someone in my lifetime who has expressed a fullness and contentedness with profits and power. It seems to me that one can always be acquiring more money, more votes, more privilege, more status, and still be lacking contentedness. How much undo stress and trauma do we put on ourselves in order to procure a marginal return? I can tell you that I've had times in my own life where I sacrificed my physical and mental health for income that wasn't worth the toll, and for gratitude that was not sufficient. And that's to say nothing of the toll on my family.

Discipleship calls us to hard, but fruitful work. The process of restoring relationships will make you bone-tired, but soul-rested. Holding the hands of those who grieve; advocating for marginalized neighbors; deconstructing and self-reflecting on our own privileges; serving, and hosting, and feeding, and welcoming strangers and neighbors alike; searching and listening for truth; genuinely offering and receiving forgiveness for our trespasses; living with empathy and expressing compassion for others – building relationships is hard, tiring, exhausting, arghh-kind-of-work. But it is work that gives lasting rest.

Independence Day  
Bob Stillerman  
Proper 9, Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 7/5/2020  
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith

One last Fourth of July thought to try and tie it all together. Jefferson wrote that he and the founders believed in certain truths, indisputable, unequivocal, lasting, self-evident truths...among these that all persons are created equal and endowed with the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I think Caesar's world teaches us to limit the "all" in that statement. And the burden of an *exclusive all* is too heavy to maintain, too unfulfilling to pursue.

Jesus tells us that the pursuit of an *inclusive all* is a worthy one. It won't be without its difficulties. It starts with the difficulty of acknowledging that the founders who penned this document had no intention of authentic inclusion. And for many of us, the hard work of inclusion contains an admission that for too long we have been content with an *exclusive all*. And more than likely, we are gonna have to give up a whole lot of things that make us wise in this world. But I would argue that an easy yolk and a light burden are an independence worth celebrating. May God give us the courage, the strength, and the fortitude to be a nation that might rightly and authentically proclaim its independence by living into an *inclusive all*.

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.