

6th Sunday after Pentecost – July 5, 2026

US Semiquicentennial

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

I always struggle with the July 4th holiday. It was my grandmother's birth and death day. And so it's always been a family-centered holiday – until the last few years where it's just kind of fallen off. So, our 4th was just spent with the hubby and dog. And it was a nice quiet day. Which left me too much time watching what was going on in the world.

Along with the personal reasons the holiday has been a downer, watching the growth of Christian Nationalism in our country, the American Exceptionalism, the hatred and bigotry that too many people are ok upholding... I just wasn't feeling celebratory. Now, some folks tend to view my non-celebratory mood as anti-patriotic. But that's not it. I do love this country. I think we live in a beautiful, diverse land. I think we can be great.

I stayed up until 4:00am Saturday morning to watch Kelsey Pflender complete her journey rowing from California to Hawaii, becoming the first American woman, as well as the youngest and fastest person to ever do it. It was inspiring and celebratory to see the great things humans can accomplish.

And then I woke up Saturday morning to the news that there were hundreds of white men marching around the Capitol as representatives of the Patriot Front calling for white men to reclaim America. Groups like this make it hard to celebrate because they aren't standing up for the country I think we all want to be a part of. But their voices are amplified. The comments online (which I know I should never read) defended their ideologies and behavior because they are "upstanding citizens – likely doctors, lawyers, educators." It just makes me sad that people have such animosity in their hearts for others who are different than them.

It's hard to celebrate freedom knowing that so many amplified voices don't actually want freedom for most of our nation. As I watched all of this unfold, I found the gospel as a reminder that we have a better option.

What precedes our gospel is messengers from John the Baptist coming to see if Jesus is really the Messiah. Jesus sends them away telling them to report all that they've seen – Jesus' healings and teachings. That alone will answer John's questions. And then he speaks to the crowds praising John as the messenger who was to come before him.

And then we reach where our gospel begins. Jesus is speaking to the crowds and chastising them. They have been given John, and he wasn't enough. Now they have Jesus in front of them and are still questioning. None of what either men did seemed to be enough. Or it wasn't what they were expecting.

The problem wasn't that God hadn't spoken. The problem was that the people didn't like the form God's message took.

I feel like we are at this point in this country. If we were in the crowd today, Jesus would be saying: "I gave my life for all people. I forgave all my children. And yet you don't love your neighbor as I have loved you." I feel like we the people have a choice to make. We are given the path of Jesus. He showed us his way. And too often we have turned toward the path of fear, division, and hate. And not just hate, but hate in the name of God.

When we get to the end of our gospel, we hear a really popular verse of Jesus saying his yoke is easy and his burden is light. Hate is a really heavy burden we are carrying as a people. Whether it's towards the other political party, towards minorities, towards the oppressed, or even toward these Patriot Front men. Our divisions have allowed hate to fester in our society and in our hearts.

But we have been given a better way. It requires recognizing a loving, redeeming God. Not using God to strike down those we disagree with. You can scour the Bible to find some verses to defend any stance you want to take. But that's not what scripture is to be used for, and that's not the point of being in

relationship with God. The path that Jesus shows is a path of action. A path of grace and love toward our neighbor. He calls on us to change our hearts. To repent of our hateful ways and turn toward the right path.

And as we finish our gospel, Jesus assures us that his way is truly the better, lighter option. If you don't know what a yoke is, a yoke is not the same as an egg yolk - they're two different words. A yoke is a wooden crossbar that connects two animals together so they can work together to carry heavy loads. So when Jesus tells us that through his path, his yoke is easy, he's not saying we won't have any problems. The yoke is still needed and there's still a burden to carry. But by taking on Jesus' yoke, it's lighter and less burdensome on our souls. If we take on Jesus' yoke of grace rather than our country's yoke of hate and division, it eases our burden tremendously.

It honestly is easier to love than hate. It is draining on us as people to divide ourselves so much. We're created to be in community caring for one another. Not divided and angry at one another. It's past time we let go of that heavier burden of hate and division and anger. We have a better path forward as followers of Christ. One that we can exemplify as Christians to make our nation stronger and unified.

I think that is the vision of a nation I can celebrate. Not one that forces everyone to be homogeneous. Or only grants power to one segment of the population. But one where we are able to come together, diverse in color, shape, identity, religion... And love one another as we have been loved by our God.

This year I struggled to celebrate Independence Day and our country's 250th birthday. But I found that I can celebrate every glimpse of a community that reflects God's kingdom. People who choose love over hate, grace over fear, and neighbor over division. And perhaps that is the truest way to celebrate our nation. Not by pretending we are everything we should be, but by choosing every day to become the people God calls us to be.