

“An Acorn, A Light Yoke, and Healing for the Weary”
 Proper 9A (July 5, 2020) - **COVID-19 (Sunday 17)**
 Scripture: Psalm 145:8-14; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter. Amen.<<

The Fourth of July has always been one of my favorite holidays. I’m not sure why. Maybe it’s because every year, except this year, July 4th marks the middle of the Major League Baseball season; and the Yankees are often in first place when Orion’s dog days of summer set in, as Homer calls them in the *Iliad*. Maybe I like July 4th because the weather is usually hot, and it reminds me of the beach – I do love the beach and the ocean in spite of the fact that, because of my fair skin, the sun and I have never gotten along very well. July 4th recalls for me baseball and beaches and barbecues, and of course fireworks. I savor the remembrance of fourths of July past – to borrow wording from Marcel Proust. I remember celebrating the fourth in Florida as a kid when we visited my grandparents in Fort Myers. We sat in the parking lot of Daddy Dee’s ice cream parlor and watched the fireworks explode over the Gulf of Mexico as we licked our ice cream cones. I remember spending one 4th of July at my friend’s house in DC, watching the fireworks over the capital from his front porch. I remember celebrating another fourth at another friend’s summer house in the Hamptons on Long Island and watching fireworks from his pier. I’ll never forget how many helicopters flew into the Hamptons that weekend from Manhattan – it looked like a scene from the film *Apocalypse Now*. I remember watching fireworks one year over the East River between Manhattan and Brooklyn from the Englewood Cliffs lookout near my home in Northern New Jersey. And, I remember celebrating July 4th one year at the Hatch Shell in Boston on a sweltering day. We found this little Charlie-Brown-like Christmas tree of a tree that cast a few square feet of shade to sit under. I wondered as we set our blanket down why no one else in the throng of people had chosen that spot. During the 1812 Overture later that evening we found out why: the Howitzer cannons that blasted away as the fireworks burst were set up just a few feet from us. Baseball and barbecues, beaches and fireworks, helicopters and howitzer cannons. I’m privileged to savor such memories.

But July 4th looks different to me this year. Maybe it does for you as well. There’s no Major League Baseball. The barbecues are private. The beaches are socially distanced. And there are fewer fireworks. In an article on Wednesday, Julie Creswell of the *New York Times* wrote that “as many as 80 percent of the holiday fireworks displays in large cities and small towns have been canceled because of the pandemic.”¹ “The annual Big Bay Boom over San Diego will be quiet this year,” she writes. “The skies over Lake Tahoe, home to the Lights on the Lake celebration, will be dark. Also falling silent will be the IPL Downtown Freedom Blast in Indianapolis; the Patriots Point Blast in Charleston, S.C.; and the Legacy Blast in Lee’s Summit, Mo. Across the country,” she writes, “the coronavirus pandemic has brought to a halt a tradition of summer: Fourth of July fireworks.” There were even fewer fireworks in our town of Ithaca last night – though, on the bright side, the moon was stunningly beautiful and we can now watch the Broadway hit *Hamilton* on Disney Plus.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/business/fourth-of-july-fireworks-displays.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgt=Homepage>

July 4th also looks different to me this year – and maybe it looks different to you as well – because this year more than any other year in my life I’m reminded that we still fall short of our nation’s highest ideals – equality and justice for all. July 4th, said Frederick Douglass to an audience in Rochester in 1852, “is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you,” he said, “is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day.”² Frederick Douglass went on in that speech to describe the disconnect between America’s highest ideals – about equality and justice for all – and the reality of slavery. “What, to the American slave,” he asked, “is your Fourth of July?” Commenting recently on his Broadway show *Hamilton*, Lin Manuel-Miranda said, “[the show tells the story of] the origins of this country and how it’s based on ideals we fell short of the moment we wrote them down. I’m well aware,” he said, that “every single one of these characters [in *Hamilton*], even though they sing songs that you love, are complicit in the original sin of slavery, whose legacies are still being felt to this day. ... The show doesn’t escape that [reality].”

Today’s Old Testament lectionary reading from the Psalms speaks in the language of ideals; it paints an ideal portrait of God. The Psalm – which is really a hymn of praise – is organized as an acrostic: each line of the poem, of the hymn begins with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet. It’s a dazzling piece of poetry with words that are idealistic. This Psalm, said Rabbi Yeheil Poupko, is the prayer of all prayers, extolling God’s mercy and kindness; singing of God’s majesty; and announcing that God lifts up all who are bowed down. It’s a portrait of God, based on Israel’s highest ideals: God as gracious toward Israel; God as kind to Israel; God as merciful to Israel; God as the champion of Israel’s downtrodden. And yet, the Psalm likely took its final edited form during Israel’s national crisis – its exile in Babylon – when all of its highest ideals were put in question, when the people of ancient Israel had lived through a series of events that none of them were prepared for.

Maybe our situation in July of 2020 is similar. On Friday, Michele Norris of the *Washington Post* wrote that our July 4th celebrations are different this year because of all that’s happened in the first half of 2020.³ “We’ve come only halfway through 2020,” she writes, “and “it already feels like a decade. Make that several decades We are all experiencing some kind of vertigo,” she writes. “2020 was already *extra* before the pandemic hit. Massive Australian brushfires. The botched count in the Iowa caucuses. ... Articles of impeachment. ... Kobe Bryant’s helicopter crashing into a mountain. And that was just the first eight weeks [of 2020]. ... When we finally emerge on the other side [of all of this],” writes Norris, “we’ll have a lot of work to do ... as we go through the mental scrapbooking in an attempt to take stock.” She goes on in that article to list the many things we’ve faced so far this year: “Health-care workers in head-to-toe protective gear. The long lines at the food banks. The banging of pots at 7 p.m. The face masks. The ventilators. The elbow bumps. A family talking to Grandma through a closed window at the nursing home. Mass graves for ... coronavirus victims. Political rallies despite calls for social distancing. A presidential candidate speaking to the world from his basement. A president barking at the world on Twitter. Funerals where no one can get out of their car. Empty subways, empty stadiums.

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<https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/speeches-african-american-history/1852-frederick-douglass-what-slave-fourth-july/>

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https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020-is-halfway-done-lets-define-what-weve-just-survived/2020/07/03/a21f843c-bd65-11ea-80b9-40ece9a701dc_story.html

The grocery store with empty shelves The essential workers on the early bus. The grocery cashiers behind plexiglass. The cops in riot gear. The tear gas in the streets. The attorney general in the park. The National Guard. Falling statues. Burning buildings. Protesters. . . . The jogger hunted by the pickup truck. The Wendy's parking lot. . . . A knee in the neck. A face on the pavement. The gasp – 'I can't breathe' – from the victims of police violence. [And] from the victims of covid-19. [And] from the masses facing a stack of bills they cannot pay. The gloved hand. The raised fist. The raised Bible. Black Lives Matter in massive yellow letters. Black. With a capital B."

So much has happened in our country and world in just six months. To Michele Norris' list we could add: our children finishing the school year on Zoom; our high school and college seniors graduating on Zoom; our teachers and professors teaching on Zoom; busted town and city budgets; communities of faith worshiping online instead of in person; the politicizing of mask-wearing; people who've lost their jobs; people in organizations who've had to lay off employees; virtual instead of in-person pride parades in June; the upending of daily routines; the pain of grieving lost loved ones in private, socially-distanced, instead of publicly in churches; social isolation for older Americans; the staggering loss of life over the past few months – what a burden we're all carrying this year as we celebrate the 4th.

It's too much. It's too painful. It's too overwhelming. It's too much to carry. Which is why, I think, Jesus' words in today's gospel reading may hold special meaning for us this year: "Come to me," he says, "*all* you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." This is one of those timeless sayings of Jesus. It's right up there with the Golden Rule: "do to others as you would have them do to you." It's timeless, like the love command: "love your neighbor as yourself." We can't know for sure, historically speaking, why Matthew, the gospel writer, included these comforting words of Jesus in his gospel. Matthew's gospel is the only New Testament gospel that includes them. Maybe Matthew includes them because his first readers in the first century were burdened with an identity crisis. Scholars have long suggested that Matthew's first readers were ethnic Jews caught in the middle of the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity. At the end of the first century, the two religions were beginning to go their separate ways, and Matthew's first readers – ethnically Jewish readers – were burdened with the decision of which way to go. "Come to me," says Matthew through Jesus, "and I will give you rest from this burden." Whatever the historical context was when these words of Jesus first appeared in print, they are timeless words – words that we still recite today at memorial services and at funeral services and at graveside services when the burden of grief is heaviest. And they're words that appear on the lectionary cycle for today as we all take stock of the first six months of 2020 – the social distancing; the altered routines; the protests; the realization that America's highest ideals are still not met for millions in our country; the uncertainty about the next six months; the grief; and the modified celebration of July 4th without baseball and fireworks. "Come to me," says Jesus, "*all* you who are burdened, and I will give you rest."

The rest Jesus offers is more than just physical rest; it's a soul-kind-of-rest. It's the kind of rest that settles the spirit – a rest that rests in loving arms that are so much bigger and stronger and sturdier than we are. It's the kind of rest that your little child craves when they come into your room in the middle of the night after waking from a bad dream. They need to be held; they may need you to sing them a song; they need to feel your arms around them; they need to be soothed and comforted – to feel safe and secure and settled. They need rest.

On Wednesday, Rev. Dr. David Gaewski, Conference Minister of the New York Conference of the UCC, wrote about the burden he's been carrying these past few weeks and about how he's found rest. "It has been 109 days since my mother died," he said, "and 102 days since the untimely death of my sister-in-law, Leo. Because of COVID we could not hold a funeral service for Mom, and we could not travel to Brazil to grieve with family members there. We did hold a zoom memorial for our immediate family, which I led. Clergy know what that means. It occurred to me on my birthday last week," says Gaewski, "that this was the first time in my life that I didn't get a phone call from Mom. This morning as we drank our coffee, my wife saw a Facebook post from 8 years ago and then the comment on it from our beloved Leo. Painful. As part of my ministerial formation," he continues, "I read books on grief. I had class time in pastoral care. I did Clinical Pastoral Education. I also lost my closest friend to a tragic death at the age of 26. I intellectually know about grief *and* I have personal experience of it. Still ... I don't understand it really. Even when I typed the numbers 2 and 6 in the last sentence, I felt an ache deep in my chest. And that death was 34 years ago. When someone you love dies," says Gaewski, "the people around us, with all good intention, have no idea what to say. Often what is heard is 'think about the ways this person blessed your life, think about the good times.' I think the one who is grieving does a favor to the one trying to comfort them by saying 'thanks.' No words are adequate. No words really help. A silent presence is the best we can do. Thirty-four years ago, a colleague, knowing I was deeply grieving, said to me, 'David, you can become better, or you can become bitter.' Those words stuck. I don't think I liked them at the time, but more than anything else, they helped me heal. After my mother's death immediately followed by the loss of Leo, my wonderful staff ... sent me an acorn. It came with a pot and some soil and moss. Three months later I have a small oak tree, now large enough to keep outdoors. Someday I will plant it in a place where I hope I can see it for the rest of my life. That gift also brought healing, like my colleague's words 34 years ago. I share these thoughts," Gaewski concludes, "as we live together through this dark valley of history. There is grief and there will be more grief. And there are no words. All we have to offer one another are acorns."

...Maybe when Jesus says, "Come to me all you are burdened," he's inviting us to turn toward each other, to draw support from each other, to give "acorns" to each other, to be compassionate with each other, to see Christ's open arms in the arms of each other. And when we accept the embrace, we'll find rest. Amen.