

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost Sermon
The Rev. Dr. William Carl Thomas
Holy Cross Episcopal Church, Wilmington NC
July 5, 2025

O Lord, our strength and our redeemer, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for God invites to live and love like Jesus, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, help others to do the same.

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Let me say this again:

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Here's an example from Holy Scripture about the tyranny of dependence on the single yoke:

“Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people and live” *Jeremiah 27:2, 8, 12*

Here are examples of yearning for independence from such a yoke:

From the sacred:

Is this not the fast that I choose; to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?” *Isaiah 58:6*

From the secular:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. *First sentence, the second paragraph of The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776*

And now hear Jesus speak of how it is possible to move from dependence to independence to inter-dependence.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are 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, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” *Matthew 28:30*

The yoke Jesus speaks of is best understood as a double-yoke. The single yoke, hanging around a neck, makes a burden such as carrying two buckets of water from a well somewhat but never truly easier. The double yoke is basically two single yokes held together in such a way to better distribute a load with the power that comes from not being or feeling alone. Imagine two oxen working together on any project that benefited from an environment where inter-dependence was paramount. When Jesus says, “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” he is reminding us that he is always with us, even when our limited imaginations keep his presence from being seen or felt. The load of life is lighter when we learn from him to share with humble hearts.

Stephen Covey, in the book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, spends many pages describing what happens when we move from dependence to independence to inter-dependence. I found a way to live into that understanding many years ago when I recognized it unfolding in a parish I served with this expression that

guided the Diocese of Rhode Island in the early 1990's: "We belong to one another, together we can make one another stronger." Actually it was when I made the phrase "together with God's help" the bridge and arrived at "We belong to one another, **together with God's help**, we can make one another stronger" that I was able to see what was holding the slogan back. A simple secular statement that aspires to inter-dependence cannot match the power of the sacred that finds substance in Jesus saying *my yoke is easy and my burden is light* with the words, "together with God's help." Perhaps you'll imagine Jesus sharing a double yoke with you when you next pray The Baptismal Covenant.

Thomas Jefferson did not use the word "yoke" when he wrote the draft that was accepted as The Declaration of Independence 250 years ago. Yet, to be released from the yoke of King George III is an expression that easily finds its way into commentaries about our founding document. Jefferson was aware of the term "Norman Yoke" as in William the Conqueror that the Magna Carta began to undo. The Norman Yoke would be an extreme example of a brutal single yoke society dependent on a powerful king. To seek life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness with all being equal would certainly be a core goal of being independent. Certainly independence would remove the yoke noted by commentators and understood by Jefferson.

And yet, we might find in Saint Francis of Assisi, a patron saint of this church known as Holy Cross in Wilmington, as one who embraced the movement from dependence to independence to inter-dependence. Saint Francis and his movement and the Magna Carta were happening at the same time in the early 13th century. By claiming his total dependence on the grace of God, Saint Francis found the holy energy to lead a movement that sought independence from the norms of a

brutal power, be it secular or sacred. This movement, which I hold dear with the term Franciscan Practice, is very much an example of what it means to live into my expression, “We belong to one another, together with God’s help, we can make one another stronger.” Franciscan practice invites a sense of the inter-dependent double yoke knowing that Jesus is sharing with all maintaining the responsibilities of that double yoke.

There is a prayer in our Book of Common Prayer that I memorized a few years ago that helps me live a principle centered life as Stephen Covey would have me attempt. You’ll find this prayer on page 832 of the Book of Common Prayer just before the prayer attributed to Saint Francis. This prayer moves through our total dependence with humility in our need for God, remember Saint Francis, our aspiration of independence as a thank you for the many gifts bestowed by God, and a realization that with God’s help, inter-dependence as we share in this life will overcome the tyranny sought by the inheritor’s of the Norman yoke.

This Prayer of Self-Dedication was written by William Temple, Archbishop of York, England during the Great Depression and, then Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II.

Hear it as a personal prayer.

Almighty and eternal God, so draw my heart to you, so guide my mind, so fill my imagination, so control my will, that I may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you and then use me, I pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

Let’s unpack this prayer in light of history guided by our willingness to say “with God’s help”:

So draw my heart to you, so guide my mind...I freely give you my life.

So fill my imagination, so control my will, that I may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you...I freely give you my liberty.

Then use me, I pray, as you will, and always to the glory and the welfare of your people...the yoke I now freely wear and share with you is how I understand the pursuit of happiness.

With that said, I'll now offer this Prayer of Self-Dedication as a communal prayer.

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

When I pray the communal version, I imagine that we are sharing a double yoke that includes Jesus, either wearing one of the yokes, or being fully present in those carrying forth the work called for by the double yoke. Thus when Jesus says, "my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" he is reminding us that he is always with us, even when our limited imaginations keep his presence from being seen or felt. The load of life is, indeed, lighter when we learn from Jesus to share with humble hearts.

Dependence...Independence...Inter-dependence.

Truly, we belong to one another, together with God's help, we can make one another stronger.

All these words I offer, in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.