

TRINITY VII
Redeemer Lutheran Church
July 16, 1972

Duplicated
7.19.72

"BORN TO BE FREED"

"When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But then what did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:20-23)

We are told that economic issues will dominate the 1972 Political Campaign. Social Security Benefits, Welfare reforms, foreign aid, taxes, and defense spending promise to be some of the debated topics. And of course WAGES and PRICES will top the list. Will we encounter a price freeze OR wage freeze during the next administration?

Whatever that economic outcome, the WAGES and the PRICE of sin will remain the same. The wages will remain UNFROZEN -- sin will continue to rise and fall. The price will remain FROZEN -- always the same. In other words, people will continue to turn away from God, and the price of such action will remain the same -- DEATH. Not necessarily physical death, but ALWAYS spiritual death.

Sin, or the turning away from God obviously brings with it the turning away from his kind of love. And without his love active between God and man, and man and man, we become bitter, indifferent, resentful, greedy - or in short, WE DIE. WE BECOME SLAVES OF SIN.

I think we have all suffered under this slavery. We have all been controlled by masters other than God. We have all known how they

destroy our vision of God. These masters enable us to rationalize our wrong and our guilt. They are so oppressive that once caught in their grip, we are torn between the delight and the disgrace that they offer.

I remember well an example from our vacation. In this situation the person enslaved by the sin saw himself suffering and many others at the same time. The master he was serving was CORPORATION PROFIT. Needless to say PROFIT in business is a necessity. But when it becomes the MASTER of BUSINESS, then it becomes divisive, demonic and humanly destructive.

He had just been promoted and transferred. At a strategizing session to increase profits, his new vice president demanded that profits must increase by 3 million dollars -- from 10 million to 13 million. He ordered cutbacks of \$600,000 in two departments. That meant two department heads were expected to drastically reduce their working force.

As we sat at the kitchen table, our friend said: "You know, I wanted to ask that vice president: 'What difference does it make!? We're already making a big profit. Isn't 10 million enough? Do we have to ruin the security of many for the sake of A LITTLE MORE PROFIT?? Where does our greed stop?'"

Needless to say our friend did not say this to his new vice president. In fact the next morning as he was leaving for work, he said to his wife: "Don't tell the neighbor what I said last night." The neighbor works in the same corporation.

Here is a man who is struggling to be fair, and yet he is enslaved to a system whose master is PROFIT. Enslaved so deeply, that he fears to express himself honestly. That kind of slavery is demonic and humanly destructive.

It sucks the spirit of righteousness out of business and out of life itself. And the kinds of tension and pressure and pain that it forces upon its human subjects have got to be spiritually if not physically murderous.

This may not be the best example of enslavement to sin. But it serves to show a master other than God. And it does show the spiritual death that CAN COME from following that master. It is not a pie-in-the-sky-picture of sin; it is the down-to-earth-death from sin.

We may not identify with this master. We may be slaves of another sin. We are surely all under the master of war. Must we war for ten years and yet be complacent about its termination. We need not be pacifists to be compassionate Christians -- I do believe we have allowed enough extermination of human life in Southeast Asia.

What other masters have SEDUCED US from our God? Is it FEAR that controls you or me? Have you ever been enslaved by PITY the way I have been. That master enables us to exaggerate our need for attention. There are times we need much attention; but if we're constantly feeling sorry for ourselves, we're on the way to spiritual death.

As Chrstians each one of us can identify a master other than God that strives to enslave us. We have all felt the spiritual plague from that master. Unfortunately, too often we suffer that spiritual death before we realize that we have been BORN TO BE FREED-- that it is God's purpose TO FREE us from the crunch of this slavery.

Paul says: "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God,

the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life.

As Christians we need not encounter spiritual death before turning to God. In fact we are always in the process of turning back to God and following him through Jesus, our master in God. This process is sanctification. It is that process of continually giving oneself to God by following Christ.

It starts as we turn back to God in love. As we repent or turn back, he forgives. He liberates us from the guilt and despair of our former slavery. We do not have to labor for that liberation -- he offers it as a free gift. In receiving that free gift, we know there is NO OPPRESSION in being slaves of God. We also partake in his future kingdom RIGHT NOW -- we have a fortaste of eternal life.

God desires that we continually be BORN AGAIN in him. He knows that His love and forgiveness will ALWAYS free us from the guilt of sin. There is constant renewal in God's love and forgiveness -- that renewal is an eternal gift he offers freely as long as we turn to receive it.

We are aware today that we have often been slaves of sin. We have followed masters who can destroy us physically and spiritually. These masters have made us speechless, dishonest, cruel, adulterers, unfaithful, resentful, . . . and you can remember others.

But we have repented, or our presence here would be meaningless. We have struggled to turn back to God -- for it is a struggle to make a sincere confession. And God will again freely forgive us at his altar -- NOT SO THAT WE CAN GO BACK TO OUR FORMER MASTERS, BUT SO THAT WE CAN LIVE ETERNALLY IN HIM.

I hope his love and forgiveness thru Christ means enough to you and me TODAY, so that we will remain SLAVES OF GOD tomorrow. For if we are still his slaves tomorrow, we might be able to share his gift of freedom with someone who has not yet experienced the rebirth that comes from God.

We have frozen the wages of sin for our moments together here -- we have not yet died spiritually or physically -- let us receive his free gift of forgiveness and then make it our master in all our relationships.

Amen.

Dear God, our Father, we are a hungry crowd in need of Your food of love and compassion -- thank you for offering more than enough to us this morning.

O Lord, you are the master and the host at your table -- Be our master and guiding host at our family tables, conference tables, department store tables, and all other tables of life where we meet face to face with humanity.

May the fruits of your forgiveness sustain us with your love so that strangeness becomes intimacy, indifference becomes concern, selfishness becomes service, bitterness becomes forgiveness, weakness becomes strength, and tension becomes peace.

Make us sensitive and compassionate toward those persons and relationships that are crumbling. Where we have aided in tearing others down, forgive us and help us to rebuild. Where we have grown cold to our commitments, rekindle the spirit of your love. Where we have fostered division and discontent, move us to repentance so that we can serve to bridge the gap.

As we have been freed from our guilt, our tension, our fears through your love, O God, strengthen us to render that same service to one another. Especially O Lord do we ask and seek to offer this compassion to those we now name before you and each other:

Keep all of these and all of us firm in our trust of you, so that even as we encounter the masters of sin, sickness or despair, we may remain under your liberation from their death for now and all eternity. Amen.

Spiritual

TRINITY VII

WRIT -- WFWO

July 16, 1972

Redeemer Lutheran Church

*Duplicated
7-19-72*

"IT'S REALLY A MIRACULOUS-MYSTERY TOUR"

Text: Mark 8:1-9

"I have compassion on the crowd, because they have been with me now three days, and have nothing to eat; and if I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way; and some of them have come a long way!" . . . His disciples answered him, 'How can one feed these men with bread here in the desert?' . . . (Jesus) asked them, 'How many loaves have you?' They said, 'Seven.' And he commanded the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and they set them before the crowd. And they had a few small fish; and having blessed them, he commanded that these also should be set before them. And they ate, and were satisfied."

You and I, much like the hungry crowd of this feeding narrative, have a need for FUNCTIONAL "food" from this story. That is, how does or can this miracle story sustain our relationship to God and to each other? Does it offer us any "food" which can be broken and shared?

The answer quite simply is "yes." Not because we are offered hosts of miraculous details. But because a MIRACULOUS HOST reveals a MIRACULOUS GIFT to each of us.

Through this feeding narrative you and I come to know the COMPASSIONATE, LIFE-FULFILLING GOD we continually search-out in life. And as we comprehend his compassionate nature, we then sing praises, give thanks, and serve one another after his example and thereby perform a MIRACLE OF LIFE ourselves.

I'm sure many hear these words as a lot of pious rhetoric. You're right. It is pious rhetoric, but much more IF you and I truly comprehend the MIRACULOUS.

Unfortunately, MIRACULOUS has too often meant MAGICAL for the contemporary mind. The nature of miracle has too often been removed from everyday life -- its too often identified as stage magic. So although we'd like to believe the miracle story, we've so limited it to the super-drama that its only the heroic acts that we identify as miracle.

For instance, consider the average person who has been hospitalized. If he has heroically recovered from a near terminal illness, then we consider this a miracle story. But if he has been one of the thousands who daily leave a hospital after surgery or routine treatment we take that recovery for granted. We fail to see the miraculous in that.

So we're really saying that the only time that God works miracles is through the super-spectacular mysteries.

How about the mystery of the gift of life itself? Isn't that a miracle? How about the mystery in the healing of the simplest wound? Isn't that a miracle? How about the mystery of respiration? Isn't that a miracle?

Isn't the miraculous character of life only mysterious--only difficult to see--because we take it so for granted? It is not UNTIL we are like a hungry crowd--a threatened civilization--a dying person--that we are completely aware of the MIRACULOUS GIFTS of life.

And so, in our text, a miraculous host, Jesus of Nazareth, satisfies an important but ever so common need--HUNGER. But he makes that common need a miraculous event. WHY? Because

He reveals that need of life to a crowd at a moment of urgency -- a moment of realized need.

So, although provision for our needs itself is a miracle -- this story is not a story of the miracle of provision. It is a story of the miracle of COMPASSION. The simple, provision for human needs becomes a MIRACLE because it is offered at the greatest moment of need. Being sensitive to another person's need when that need has peaked and responding to it is COMPASSION. And such a response IS ALWAYS a miracle to the one who receives. Such a response consistently characterized Jesus' ministry -- it is no wonder that SO MANY miracle stories are reported as a part of his ministry.

Confront Jesus with a lost soul, a tired body, an enslaved or oppressed person, and his first instinct was TO HELP -- TO MEET ANOTHER'S NEED WHEN THAT NEED WAS GREATEST!

As Christians we pledge ourselves to that same kind of lifestyle. We do not critically judge when the temptation to condemn would be easier and less involving. We do not overlook the need when we feel unable to totally solve it. We do not become skeptics about our ability to help, because we know all these things deny the miraculous power that God has given us.

Jesus does not let us give up our God-given power to perform a miracle. His disciples said: 'How can we possibly feed these men with bread here in the desert?' Jesus could have said at that time, 'You've got a point -- we'll never be able to feed their hunger out here.' But instead he CHALLENGED his disciples to action: He gathered what was already available, gave thanks for it, and distributed it. "And they ate, and were satisfied."

This is our model for ministry. It is the model which enables us to perform MIRACLES OF LIFE. It is MORE THAN PIOUS RHETORIC.

It is an outlook on life which sees a miracle story in every offering of COMPASSION. Jesus' ministry enables me to use my gifts, regardless of how insignificant they may appear to me, TO HELP another's need. As a Christian I do not question the importance of my offering, I give it thankfully as a response for God's gifts to me.

Jesus doesn't let his disciples give up. He simply motivates them to gather their resources and share them. That kind of lifestyle often calls for sacrifice. It generally involves risks. There are no guarantees that the giving will fulfill the need. But it is the response of COMPASSION that initiates the miraculous.

We do have the power to perform miracles. Our mission may not be the feeding of four thousand. It may simply be feeding one other person. That person may even be a member of my family or yours. He may not have a physical hunger; he may simply need the reassurance that you and I care. Maybe he needs a father's time as much as his mother's. Maybe he could use a word of thanks now & then. Maybe she could too.

The specific needs are very obvious in every situation -- if we're willing to look at them. Poverty cannot be genuinely overlooked -- resentment cannot be covered up through avoidance or frosting smiles -- human needs cannot be resisted when we are filled with the Spirit of Compassion.

As God has shown us his compassion through his son, we have the power to provide for human needs. We possess that revelation and

that power of COMPASSION. It is that God-given power that enabled Jesus to perform miracles during his life. And it is that same God-given power which enables each of us to perform miracles today.

This may sound like much pious rhetoric. But those who have offered Compassion to a brother in need have experienced the miraculous power and fulfillment of being in God.

They have not only satisfied another's need, but they have satisfied their own.

Amen.

PENTECOST VII
Church of the Master - Troy
July 21, 1974

"KEEP THE FAITH"

(See Luke 10:1-9, 16)

There is a story of two farmers standing by a fence between their land early in the spring. The one inquired: "Jake, what are you going to plant this year - corn?"

"Nope - scared of the corn borer," replied Jake.

"What about potatoes?" asked the neighbor.

"Nope, too much danger of potato bugs," was Jake's reply.

"Well then," asked the neighbor, "what are you going to plant?"

And Jake, spattering the fence with a squirt of tobacco juice, answered: "Nothing. I'm going to play it safe."

* * * *

James B. Conant, one time president of Harvard, had a small replica of a turtle on his desk with the motto: "Consider the turtle, he never makes any progress unless he sticks his neck out."

* * * *

Art critic, Bernard Berenson, in his book, "Rumor and Reflection," writes about the aristocratic classes by saying: "A class begins to decline when it begins to play for safety, for securing its privilege, power, wealth, and while sitting tight on its money bags, opposes innovation."

* * * *

All three of these illustrations illuminate the phenomenon of risk. This same element of risk permeates Jesus' commissioning of the seventy-two in today's Gospel lesson. In essence he was telling them: "To keep the faith you're going to have to stick your necks out - there will be little room for playing it safe. 'I am sending

you like lambs among wolves. Don't take a purse, or a beggar's bag, or shoes; don't stop to greet anyone on the road. Whenever you go into a house, first say - "peace be with this house." And he goes on giving very specific directions regarding this particular evangelism program.

It should be fairly obvious that Jesus was not simply saying - "just go out there and put on a smile and wear your "Smile - God loves you" button and everything will be great!" Quite to the contrary, these disciples were being called to be the image of God with LESS THAN AMIABLE Jews and Greeks of the first century.

Jesus' admonition here is not some pie-in-the-sky God talk. It's very practical, down-to-earth advice. He sends the disciples out in twos not only for morale support, but also because of physical dangers. The physical danger of highway robbers, as well as the physical danger of people who disagreed with what the disciples had to say.

If we can imagine Jesus commissioning 72 Troy residents to go into the heart of Detroit tonight and share the love of Christ, then I think we've at least caught a glimpse of the biblical scene before us. Jesus was sending these disciples into a rough area - and he was not mincing words when describing the riskiness and commitment that was integral to his mission.

Obviously - we ask ourselves, WHY? Why would Jesus commend respectable followers to go down there and hustle with those heathens. Why would he endanger the lives of that handful of followers - about the same number of committed adults that we have right here at the Master? Why would he encourage them to take such a risk?

QUITE SIMPLY - because that's the very nature of God - and of people who have faith in God! God's very nature is TO TAKE RISKS. Wouldn't you say that God took a small risk in creation?!? Imagine - He creates this fantastic universe, and

then he's got the ^{gall} ~~courage~~ to risk its upkeep to man. He takes the risk TO TRUST that mankind will continue TO CARE AND USE the creation in the image of God. That's one fantastic risk!

But that's only a part of his "Word" - which means, his total revelation. He not only risks that part of his Word, but he also risks his way with man. He shows his love to Abraham - to Moses - he chooses a people who are to be the model of his love -- he calls out prophets to remind his people of his constant love -- and after he has risked himself with all these AND THEY HAVE CONTINUED TO BLOW IT -- what does he do?

Does he say - "well, that's that! I've risked myself enough for all those hypocritical followers of mine! I've had it - I'm done risking my way with a people who demand their own way."

In no way does God retract his risky nature. Quite to the contrary, he goes the ultimate route of risk - he reveals himself in the form of a man. AND GOD COULDN'T HAVE TAKEN A GREATER RISK THAN TO BECOME A MAN. Because ^{to a man} ~~now~~ NO ONE can accuse him of being removed from life. Because now he has taken the risk of becoming flesh. And it's always risky to implant transcendent power into earthly vessels.

^{Yes -} ~~Because~~ ^{God took the supreme risk - because} as a man, now people can distort the true intention of God. Now they can ridicule God's efforts to feed the hungry - to clothe the naked - to forgive the despairing. Yes, now humanity can laugh at God when he visits the imprisoned - whether physically imprisoned or spiritually imprisoned with guilt. Yes, now people can mock this man of God -- they can spit at him when he associates with the poor and socially unacceptable -- yes, and as their final attack on God -- they can finally drive nails through his flesh and see how he handles that one!

But God's nature is to even accept the risk of crucifixion. Not a desirable risk, but a necessary risk IN ORDER TO make known to man THE ULTIMATE LIMITS OF GOD'S LOVE. Yes, God's very nature is to take risks - to stick his neck out for the sake of anyone who needs him.

And - yes, he even takes the risk to entrust his gospel with some pretty imperfect followers. With fisherman. With tax-collectors. Even with radicals like Judas. Yes, he even takes the risk to entrust HIS WORD AND PRESENCE OF FORGIVING LOVE with people like you and me. How about that?!? Let's face it - we know that when he get's to the point of entrusting us TO BE HIS INCARNATED PRESENCE in the world -- THEN he's really taking a risk.

But that's our God. Taking the risk of making his nature known through imperfect human vessels like you and me. My friends, how can anyone BE OPPOSED to a God who forever continues to risk himself TO US IN THIS WAY?!? How can people reject a gracious God who brings his kingdom as near to them AS THE COMMITTED DISCIPLE who is sitting next to them.

Yes - God's kingdom is very near -- because wherever his love is made flesh, his kingdom is touching us. AND THAT's pretty near right now if we want it to be.

How have we responded TO HIS KINGDOM MADE FLESH? Has our nature and faith been offered in his image - in the image of risk. How have we risked ourselves to make his love and forgiveness known?

Does our risk ONLY extend as far as a balanced budget? How far have we extended ourselves TO MAKE HIS PRESENCE KNOWN IN THE FLESH?

Do we feel alienated right now from someone in our own family - or from a friend? Jesus commissic us in this Gospel - to take the risk to extend God's love and forgiveness to this person even though it may not be easy.

How far have we extended God's presence to our own children? Have we taken the risk to let them see THAT OUR CHRISTIAN FAITH REALLY MEANS SOMETHING TO US. Or, have we been neutral about our image of God - just letting our children do their own thing -- not even taking the risk to let them know OUR FAITH helps us to deal with our own failures.—

And then, of course, what risks have we taken to en flesh God's presence to those who are needy - whether they're in the inner-city of Detroit - or next door to us - ^{or parent} or whether that needy person is ^{our} spouse or child who feels we no longer care? Yes, What risks have we taken in KEEPING THE FAITH.

* * * * *

taken

God has a tremendous risk. He has given us a whole creation and even provided a blueprint for harmonious living in that creation. And beyond that, he's taken the ultimate risk of PROMISING to forgive us when we blow it.

He has truly taken the risk TO KEEP HIS FAITH in us. ~~EVEN WHEN we've blown it.~~ Jesus says: Whoever listens to you, listens to me; whoever rejects you, rejects me; and whoever rejects me, rejects the one who sent me."

My Christian friends - let's keep the faith NOT ONLY BY LISTENING to him, BUT BY SHARING HIS PRESENCE in the flesh.

Amen

7TH AFTER PENTECOST

Lutheran Church of the Master - Troy
(Also delivered at North Hills Church)
July 6, 1975 (July 4th weekend)

"AT EASE"

"Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying your heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. The yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light."

Math. 11:28-30

199 years ago our American ancestors fought for release from an oppressive, colonizing power. Integral to their migration to American and later revolutionary opposition was their will to be free from the burdens of a slavish religious system. They wanted freedom from the tiring weight of ecclesiastical idolatry and dictate. Religion, contrary to its gospel of freedom and forgiveness, had become an intolerable yoke to bear.

Such, also, was the analogous backdrop to Jesus' words in today's gospel. Religion in his day had become a burden - the Scribes and Pharisees had made the Jewish faith into a ridiculously detailed observance of jots and tittles. A good Jew found himself picking his way through an incredible maze of "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not."

Obviously, the edge in this religious game went to the moneyed class - for they had the leisure to work at it and become proficient. But for the poor it was no longer a "strong defense" or a "Lord's song;" religion had become dead weight on their shoulders.

Worship of the Lord and the uplifting power of the gospel had been buried under a top-heavy superstructure of ecclesiastical complexities. Similarly, the reformation era bled from a surgical procedure against the same ecclesiastical cancer.

And so, what about the ?

~~Which brings us to present - and what is religion~~

in this technocratic, Bicentennial era of ours? Is faith synonymous with a worthwhile community project? Do our religious communities simply extend Americana commercialism -- kind of a get-with-Jesus consumerism? Or is our attitude toward the church simply the weary business of keeping a lot of creaking machinery running?

How do we tell the story of our church? Do we convey that life in the church is the dreary story of pushing and pulling - of scratching heads and rubbing brains together in endless efforts at artificial respiration to breathe life into a corpse? (This may not be true at the Master or North Hills - but it's often the storyline people equate with Christianity.)

I'm afraid that religion was not only a burden in the 1st century - nor the 15th - nor in the pre-Revolutionary mother countries. It appears that religion is still a wearisome burden for many Christians today - both drop-outs and practitioners. (We need only look at one another in worship to see what a dreary business our faith often becomes.)

And it's against this setting that Christ enters center stage and says: "Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying your heavy loads, and I will give you rest. . . The yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light."

This is not the offer of an additional nap in the afternoon - nor to see the Christian community as a bunch of bikini-nied sun bathers. Jesus is saying here that our faith offers life a zest - a lift. Instead of the dead-dumb idols of regulations, status, and proper chancel prancing in the temple - Jesus here points to God and his everlasting arms - the God who has said: "I have made, I will carry."

The Christian faith is not a matter of working at your religion BUT A NEW AWARENESS of the God who is at work in you and me. We call the Gospel "good news" because it enables you and me to take our eyes off ourselves - off our endless duties and failures - and to fix them on God

who promises to carry us, no matter what we've done or what we haven't done. We say we have good news, because the Gospel fixes our eyes on the yoke of Christ - namely, the cross. And it's that yoke - that life, death, and resurrection for our sake - which frees us from the bondage to duties that we failed to accomplish yesterday.

In essence - religion always becomes a burden when the power of Christ is taken out of the center of its life. Let organizational machinery, or emphasis upon proper spiritualization, or a fixation with a hierarchy of gifts, -- let these or any other side effects elbow Christ out of the center of faith, and religion becomes a burden to be hoisted and hauled around with all the rest of our burdens.

Jesus says - the yoke I will give you is easy - the load light. "Easy" here means "well-fitted." The yoke Christ gives us is well-fitted because it's the yoke we need - namely, the yoke of uplifting love and forgiveness. And that yoke, that load, is much lighter to carry than the load of guilt and hostility, resentment and despair.

Obviously - Jesus does not leave us WITHOUT a load to carry. He gives us the load of his power - and that's a responsible load to carry. But it's a load that frees us from the tiresome burdens being constantly dumped on our shoulders. His load is demanding but life-giving - it's a yoke which puts us "AT EASE" rather than making us more "UP TIGHT."

As I reflect upon this past week, I am mindful of many wearisome burdens that were added to my life and many that I added to others' lives.

Like many of you, I've been the target for both real and false accusations. And I'm certain I've thrown both real and false poisonous darts at others. And then too, I'm sure I've added to the burdens of others by sheer neglect - the sin of overlooking the needs of others. I'm sure I've done this with good intentions, bad intentions, and sometimes without any intentions.

As for me, I surely need to receive and share the yoke of Christ with those I have encountered this past week. I would venture to bet that I'm not alone - that we all could benefit by sharing that well-fitted yoke of God's love. Yes, we've all allowed God to be on the fringes of our lives this past week -- it's time to again allow him his rightful spot - right in the center.

And then I think of the past year of this nation-- and anticipate the Bicentennial year ahead. What heavy burdens we have borne during this 198th year of our nation's life. We have been a nation which has had to face up to its burdens of guilt, corruption and suspicion. And it has been good for us -- for we were a nation losing our integrity both domestically and internationally.

We have experienced the cost of being obsessed with ourself -- to often either caught in self-flagellation or self-gratification. Yes - we've too often put our nation's navel at the center of things -- allowing Christ to exist at the fringes of our transactions and corporate dealings.

But there is always great hope in Christ - because his yoke is an uplifting one. It is my hope - both a Bicentennial and constant Christian hope - that 1976 will be more than a lot of self-congratulation will be more than red-white-and blue idolatry.

Obviously - every nation needs a dash or two of national pride - but hopefully the main ingredient of this nation will be more than a lot of emotional horn-blowing and flag waving. Hopefully, basic to this nation's Bicentennial and future will be the yoke of Christ.

For we can be certain that His yoke will deliver us from the up-tight, suspicious, greedy, and guilt-ridden consciousness of the present.

It is time that we as a religious community and nation stand "at ease" in the presence of God, of one another, and of those who are less fortunate than we are. The yoke of Christ is well-fitted and light to bear - *it is the yoke that allows us to* at ease with him and one another.

AMEN

CALL TO PRAYER:

Come from your routine - take off your masks
and be yourself. Be joyful, for it is God
who has given you your life.

THE EVENING PRAYER

O Lord, we praise you
that you have created us for freedom
in your creation,
that you have re-created us for freedom
under your Gospel,
that you enable us to keep your law in
freedom and love.

We confess -

that we often neglect our rights,
that we often abuse our privileges,
that we often avoid our obligations,

Keep us

from selfishness that stifles freedom,
from narrow-mindedness that limits freedom,
from hatred that destroys freedom.

Enable mankind everywhere

to live under free government,
to hear of the freedom of your gospel,
to know true freedom in Jesus Christ,
our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

OFFERTORY SENTENCE:

Gracious Father, we offer with joy and thanks-
giving

what you have first given us --
ourselves, our time, and our possessions--
signs of your goodness and symbols of our love.
Receive them for the sake of him
who offered himself for us, Jesus Christ our Lord
Amen

PENTECOST VII

Luth Church of the Master, Troy
July 2, 1978

"ONE THING GOD CAN'T DO!"

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Matt. 11:29,30

How many of us could perfectly fulfill more than 610 laws of personal conduct every day of our lives? Most of us can't even fulfill the 10 commandments on any one day of our lives -- in fact, we all know that none of us fulfills the 10 commandments on any day of our lives. We are by nature SINFUL and UNCLEAN.

Well, imagine if you were living in a town where your neighbors were watching you every day to look for the occasion when you would break one of those 600 laws of conduct. How do you think you'd feel? I know how I'd feel!

Absolute^{ly} OPPRESSED with the burden of the law! The scribes and Pharisees had taken the Torah, which God intended to be his roadmap, and had turned it into an iron curtain. Instead of the law leading men to a proper relationship with God and all humanity -- it became the stumbling block between God and man, and likewise between fellow human beings.

The law had become an end in itself -- it had become the wedge of self-righteousness. The law had only been intended to point people to God; now it had become the very purpose for existence.

It is this condition that Jesus is addressing when he says: "Come to me, all who labor and are heaven laden; and I will give you rest." Totally contradicting the scribes and Pharisees - Jesus announces God's purpose as one of relieving guilt -- not increasing it.

I am told that at this time our brothers and sisters of faith in the Roman Cath church live under 12 volumes of canon law. I am also told that among the issues debated in these volumes is whether it is proper or improper to "pass gas during a mass."

Yes - it is funny -- but you see how ridiculously

burdensome our faith becomes when the law becomes its total focus. It is no wonder that Martin Luther while still a monk had a very bad case of constipation.

Jesus says, come to me all of you who are constipated by the burden of legalism, and I will give you the rest of the gospel. That's not to say that Jesus was against the law. It is only to say that Jesus properly fulfilled the law -- its purpose was to point him and each of us to the Father.

And that's exactly what the Law did throughout Jesus' life and ministry -- always pointed him to his Father. And that's the way the Holy Spirit uses the law to this day -- to point Jesus' disciples to the Father.

But you know and I know that most of us CONTINUE to abuse the law -- to make it a cast iron burden, rather than a directive to God. I remember a young woman who had suffered more than one nervous breakdown-- all going back to the legalism of her home.

She had been raised in a fundamentalistic, pentecostal family, in which her parents were more interested in drilling into her the TERROR of God - the Terror of hell - and the awful terror of sin -- much more interested in this than impressing her with the fact that they loved her.

And so she yearned for affection. When she was in high school, she had a date with a great guy in her class. For the first time in her life, she was shown affection in a harmless, adolescent way. She enjoyed that beautiful experience so much that she stayed out with the boy until 3 o'clock in the morning.

When she arrived home, her mother was waiting for her in the doorway like an avenging beast. She demanded that her daughter get down on her knees and confess her sinfulness, her absolute degradation, and further confess that she had done evil things - and finally pray to God that he would spare her from the jaws of hell.

Is it any wonder that this woman could never have children -- was afraid to make love -- and was a frequent patient in psychiatric institutions?

Yes - some of the most well-meaning Christians have blasphemed God our Father more destructively than some agnostics. For the worst sin of all is self-righteousness. God can still change the heart and mind of an agnostic -- But he who sees himself as perfect is an almost hopeless case.

There is no heavier burden to bear than a life which is never allowed escape from the condemnation of the law. It was that situation that Jesus was up against in his day -- and you and I are up against the same situation today.

There is not one of us in this room who believes he is without sin. Not one of us needs to be convinced that we are sinful -- we all know that. And in fact, we know it so well that we use our sinfulness to put one another down. That is one of the greatest games the law fosters in us. Instead of the law pointing us to our Father -- we use the law to point out the faults we see in each other. And all that just creates a heavier burden for each of us.

Is it any wonder that Jesus said: Come unto me all of you who labor and are heavy laden -- and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.

His yoke is not perfectionism -- but forgiveness. That's why he could say that his yoke was easy -- and his burden light. Jesus did not mean that his yoke was an escape from struggles -- or from labors of love and sacrifice. But he did mean that his yoke was a relief from condemnation -- his yoke was a new beginning -- a chance to begin life over again. His yoke is easy and the burden light BECAUSE ~~HE REMEMBERS~~ HE FORGETS THE FAILURES OF THE PAST.

Jesus' yoke reminds us that there's one thing GOD CAN'T -- and WON'T DO. HE WON'T REMEMBER OUR SINS ANYMORE. Jeremiah says in chapter 31: "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more!"

Now you tell me that this isn't Good News. That's why Jesus could always turn to the Father -- and that's why Jesus urged his disciples to TURN TO THE FATHER, esp. when they had sinned - when they had broken the law:

Because our God, our Lord, is that Father who forgives our iniquity AND DOES NOT REMEMBER OUR SIN ANYMORE.

Isn't that great to believe in a God WHO CAN'T AND WHO WON'T REMEMBER YOUR SIN OR MINE ANYMORE!! Tell me now who else you know that's like the God of Abraham, Issac, Jacob, and you & me? Tell me of another person on earth WHO CAN'T OR WHO WON'T REMEMBER OUR SIN ANYMORE.

There isn't any other person. Because every other person is just like you and me -- we forgive, but we also remember. God wipes the slate clean -- ABSOLUTELY CLEAN.

Yes - the yoke Jesus gives us is the yoke of forgiveness: Jesus says that the yoke of discipleship is easy -- the burden light That doesn't mean that discipleship is a life without labors of love -- we are not called to be lazy lovers.

Quite to the contrary -- we are called to share the yoke of forgiveness. And it's easy and light BECAUSE IT'S SUCH A FANTASTIC PRIVILEGE TO HAVE A GOD WHO DOES NOT REMEMBER OUR ACTS OF REBELLION AND DISOBEDIENCE.

What a great opportunity -- to carry the yoke of Christ. What could be greater than to share the yoke of forgiveness! What could be greater than to have a God who forgives and remembers our sins no more!

There is no greater vocation in life than to be a disciple and carry the yoke of Christ!

AMEN

PENTECOST VII

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
July 6, 1980 (July 4th Weekend)

"A DECLARATION OF FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY!"

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... For you were called to freedom; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: You shall love your neighbor as yourself!
Galations 5:1,13-14

"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed that whenever any form of government becomes destructive to these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it."

on July 4th

A few years ago a newspaper man interview 122 people in Madison, Wis. with the words I have just read on a piece of paper. After allowing the people to read the words, he asked them if they could identify its source.

More than two-thirds of the people said they thought it had been written by some radical. Several of them said it was silly idealism. Still others said it was the verbage of some Communist sympathizer. And only 13 -- that's 13 out of 122 -- recognized the words as a portion of the Declaration of Independence.

Yet -- all 122 of those people were at the fireworks at the time of that interview. The story really causes me - and I hope you -- to wonder just how many Americans really have any serious understanding of the foundation of freedom. Regretably - the 4th of July for most Americans today is just another 3-day weekend of hedonism without too much thought about the cost of freedom -- and even less thought about

religious freedom. But hopefully that's not true for you and me ... and it surely wasn't true for the majority of our religious forefathers.

A basic declaration of religious people (even before Christ) has been freedom from all powers and principalities which seek to negate the fundamental principles of faith -- whether those powers be political or religious.

The Jews have always sought freedom from the oppression of foreign domination, whether they were Egyptians, Babylonians, or Palestinian Arabs today.

Likewise - early Christianity sought deliverance from the imposition of the Pharisaic bondage to the ceremonial law.

The Reformation was a protest against the oppressive rules of a religious hierarchy which was more committed to self-perpetuation than to the gospel of its Lord.

The colonization of America was largely the result of a Puritan protest against the Anglican domination of English piety.

The upheaval among R.C. Theologians and priests today represents an escalating protest against a human hierarchy that seems progressively out-of-touch with its well-educated masses.

The split of the Luth Church-Miss. Synod a few years ago is a tell-tale story of how the people of God react against a legalistic president who manipulates the church through the letter of the law while totally disregarding the spirit of the gospel.

There can be no doubt about it! To be a Christian is to be a freedom fighter... that is, to fight to be freed from anything and everything that is less than God himself. No person, no nation, no politics or party, no rule deserves allegiance over God himself.

Allegiance to the reconciling power of God and him alone is the DECLARATION OF CHRISTIAN FREEDOM. That declaration was the foundation of this world long before 1776 -- and it will be the final foundation of the world to come. True faith is the declaration of freedom from all principalities and powers which seek to enslave us to the finite things of this world.

Obviously - the logical question then is -- does our Christian freedom mean that we are free to do as we please? And to that we say an emphatic "NEVER!" True freedom always serves a higher principle - namely, responsibility! Christian freedom is not a license to do our own thing -- it is an opportunity to be freed to do God's thing. Christian freedom does not excuse us from responsibility -- rather, it removes the obstacles that often deter us from being responsible.

One author has described ^{Xen}~~this~~ freedom as the difference between driving on a freeway or main street of the city. Both serve to get the driver to his destination. But the freeway eliminates the obstacles of intersections and congestion. And its those obstacles which often can frustrate or divert us from reaching the destination. The freeway eliminates the obstacles -- it better allows us to concentrate on getting to the goal -- it helps us to be more responsible to where we're going.

Through Jesus Christ, God has given us a freeway to our destination with him and each other. The obstacle of guilt - the obstacle of status and prestige - the obstacle of greed and selfishness - the obstacle of perfect duty to the law -- all of these ~~are~~ roadblocks are by-passed when following the freeway of Christ.

^{relationships} Christ frees us from these barriers ^{to meaningful}~~to~~ ^{abundance}~~to~~ by giving us a direct route to the destination of true religion -- namely, responsible service to our fellowman.

That's why today's text from Galatians tells us that Christ frees us "not so that we will use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh (meaning an opportunity for worldly gratification or greed) - but he frees us to be responsible in the image of God -- namely, by serving one another.

Through the freedom of the gospel, ~~Christian~~ religion finally becomes responsible for what God intended it to be -- not a storehouse of rules and regulations for self-perpetuation, but rather a dynamic body of loving servants seeking to care for the world and its inhabitants according to God's original design.

Responsible religion does not free us from serving, it frees us to serve -- it frees us to be committed disciples. True religion always leads the individual to a greater responsibility and commitment to improve the world ... to leave the society that he has inherited a better place than he found it.

But there is a national religious disease that has spread across America these days -- it is the absence of this spirit of commitment... it is the absence of a spirit of fidelity... it is the absence of the fruits of the spirit namely, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Instead of this spirit of freedom and commitment -- many Americans are suffering from the slavery of self-preoccupation -- and St. Paul makes very clear what the results are for any nation suffering from self-preoccupation -- the results are: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and all the like of these.

The slavery of self-preoccupation always

leads to these obstacles of the flesh; the slavery of self-preoccupation always negates the greatest by-product of freedom -- namely, responsibility and commitment.

And that is why you and I have returned to the Table of the Lord today ... in order that we might be healed from the human epidemic of self-preoccupation.... in order that we might be freed from yesterday's faults and failures, so that we can make new promises of responsibility for today and tomorrow.

And Jesus Christ promises that as we eat and drink his real presence -- that he offers us liberty from our self-obsession and gives us renewed direction for our discipleship.

Likewise, as Garrett Michael was baptized into Christ's body this morning -- all of us promised to foster Christ's lifestyle of freedom in him... to help him give thanks forever that he is a forgiven child of God so that he might live as a responsible servant toward his fellowman.

The question for us as we leave here today is: what will we do with Christ's declaration of freedom?? Will it lead us to greater responsibility to our family -- to our society -- to our church? Will it empower us to love our neighbor as we desire to be loved?? Will it give us greater integrity in our faith -- thereby influencing the things we say, the ministry we do, and the gifts and money we share??

We all know the answer to that question. Christ sets us free from self-preoccupation in order that we might be more responsible to one another. He who lives accordingly IS LIVING BY THE SPIRIT rather than the flesh.

AMEN

PENTECOST VII
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
July 15 & July 18

HOMETOWN BOY GETS COOL RECEPTION

"And they took offense at him. And Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.' And he could do no mighty work there ... "

When did you have your last homecoming?? Very possibly that's a reality that's long gone. But for many of us there is still a place or a people that we call "home." It's that place that we grew up; it's that place that gave us our first real taste of life; it's among those people that we first experienced love and acceptance; it's among those people that we first encountered success and failure. It's the one place and the one people from which we'd always like to feel a warm, cordial, inviting atmosphere.

For Jesus, according to Mark, that place was Nazareth. He had been out on his own for a few years. He had already established himself as a leader with a great following. He was already known as a great prophet; he was widely known as one who could overcome even the devil. His preaching and wondrous acts of healing had won him great acclaim in Galilee. And now, with high hopes, he had come home. And as usual, he went to the most familiar place of that home -- the synagogue, where he had attended school and spent much time when he was away from his father's carpenter's shop.

But contrary to his expectations, his hometown reception was anything but warm. It was downright cold, or as Mark puts it, "offensive." The people of Nazareth were not impressed with their hometown boy. They closed their ears and minds to his message, and only remembered him for what he once was -- the son of a humble, poor carpenter and his wife.

Is it any wonder that Jesus says, there is no honor for a prophet in his own country, his own home. By the word "prophet," Jesus was obviously referring to anyone who speaks God's truth without reservation. To speak boldly of God's truth is to always risk rejection.

Is it any wonder that the prophetic voice from the pulpit

is quickly rejected by most home congregations. People, even God's people, too often do not want to hear God's truth -- they do not want to hear of their sinfulness, their racism, their slander, their bigotry, their own violent tendencies. They want the preacher to condemn the criminal who steals and shoot his gun; but they don't want to hear anything about fraud, or tax evasion, or nuclear holocaust.

Yes, like Jesus, to be God's prophetic voice ... to bear the tidings of his truth is to often be rejected by the howntown crowd. Four and one-half centuries ago Martin Luther recognized this when he summarized the qualities and virtues of a good prophetic preacher. He said, "first he (or she today) should be able to teach in a right and orderly way; second, he should have a good head; third, he should be able to speak well; fourth, he should have a good voice; fifth, he should know when to stop; sixth, he should stake body and life, good and honor on his message; and lastly -- he must suffer himself to be vexed and flayed by everybody."

It is clear that Luther recognized the consequences of telling God's complete story of love -- you run the risk of rejection from the home folk. Or as Luther would say, one of the aims of preaching is to bring the love and peace of God to our hearts, but equally true it is also supposed to disturb our minds and our lives ... it is to help us take stock of our shortcomings.

In short, telling God's truth is more than a superficial smile of affection or a short summary of do's and don'ts. God's love and mercy is a power which reorients our lifestyles and priorities. The people of Nazareth did not want this kind of truth ... esp. from Jesus. They wanted to maintain the same superficial relationship they had with Jesus as a boy.

One commentator says the village folk of Nazareth were what might be called "factfinders." They had all the physical facts about Jesus -- his birth, his occupation, his home and his family. They had added up the facts, and from all the facts there was just no way this Jesus could be the Messiah.

Isn't that often what we define as truth -- we look no deeper than the surface -- we only view the superficial facts

and then we conclude that we have the truth. We look at a man's skin ... or at the neighborhood he lives in ... or at the university he graduated from ... or at the brand of clothing that he wears ... and from these superficial judgements we claim that we know this person. Is it any wonder that there are so many problems in the world when we have based truth on such superficial values? Is it any wonder that so many marriages and friendships are so shallow? They go no deeper than what can be seen on the surface.

Possibly some of you have experienced friendships which have suddenly encountered silent rejection from former friends who only wanted a shallow relationship. Get honest with your feelings or thoughts with such people and suddenly they're no longer speaking with you.

Susan and I have often learned, like Jesus, to deal honestly and more deeply with the real issues of life often leads to rejection. Regretably -- far too many people want to go no further than the weather, clothing styles, and superficial topics. To think about, contemplate, or confront the deeper issues of God's love and justice, of his mercy and compassion -- these topics are avoided.

Too often we all succumb to a crowd mentality. We're like the Ozark mountaineer who came to the county fair to hear a presidential hopeful. During the entire speech this mountaineer shouted from the stands ... until he was hoarse. Later a reporter asked him what he thought about the candidate's speech. He replied, "I didn't come here to think; I came here to holler!" Very possibly too much politicking and preaching today has become a lot of hollering.

Jesus has always had greater hopes for us-- his hometown people of Toledo. He desires that we grasp more than the superficial facts of his life or of one another's -- more than the facts about birth, hometown, family and occupation. He desires that we know more than the color of his eyes or shape of his nose. He wants us to know him NOT as the babe from Bethlehem or boy from Nazareth -- but as the man who reflected the full dimensions of God's love. To know the man Jesus is to know both the PROPHEPIC and PEACE-GIVING power of God.

Or as our Old Testament lesson reminds us, God's prophetic word comes to disturb us from our superficial lifestyles of impudence and stubbornness. Where we have grown complacent, God challenges us to rebuild the kingdom. Where we have been unforgiving, God commands that we repent. Where we have been thoughtless and slandering, God urges renewed understanding and study of his word. Where we have been fearful and self-pitying, God offers the power and vision for a better tomorrow. Where we have been immoral and unclean, God assures us of forgiveness in order that we might live anew.

God empowers us to see more than his superficial affection and our external needs. The people of Nazareth only saw Jesus as he once was --they saw no further than the surface. For that reason Jesus said "no mighty works" could be done in that place.

The same is true for the people of God today. No mighty work can be done in a church not possessed by a faith that its Lord is the Alpha and the Omega. A church may possess the mighty works of architecture, of music, and of eloquence, but still be missing the mighty work of redemption. That mighty work of redemption only happens when we see Jesus Christ as more than a carpenter's boy ... more than Mary's son ... more than the little baby from Bethlehem or boy from Nazareth. It's not our facts about Jesus but our faith in his love and mercy that has caused God's people to move mountains over the centuries.

Today, Christ again encounters his hometown folk -- whether in Nazareth or Toledo. Much like 2000 years ago, he wants that relationship to be more than something on the surface -- he wants mighty works of love to result from our relationship to him and one another.

What kind of reception will he receive among us ... and all the other hometown folk throughout the world?? Will we honor him today as a prophet, and then be back to war, violence and immorality tomorrow?? Or will we take offense that he wants greater loyalty than a superficial kind of love?? Or will we accept his forgiveness for yesterday's failures, and follow him anew that his mighty works of redemption might be seen in Toledo and all the cities of the world??

The prophetic call of Jesus is not to be perfect, but to be faithful. And all who have heard this call will know there

has been a prophet among them this day.

AMEN

PENTECOST VII
LIBERTY WEEKEND - July 3 & 6, 1986
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"GIVE ME LIBERTY, OR GIVE ME DEATH!"

(Text inserted in bulletin - Galations 5:1,13-14, 6:14-16)

It was 1774. She was a nation barely free from her maternal womb. But she was already struggling for independence. She wanted the umbilical cord severed. She wanted no further dominance by her unnatural English mother. She wanted liberation from the ever-escalating British militia that kept her impotent and insecure.

And so she called the First Continental Congress in Philadelphia. And there she listened to the likes of Washington and Jefferson, Adams and Lee and Harrison. But none spoke more eloquently than a successful Virginia lawyer, Patrick Henry. It was after this 1st Continental Congress at St. John's Church, Richmond - the Second Virginia Convention - that Patrick Henry stirred a weak and terrified assembly into America's revolution for liberty:

We have done everything that could be done to avert the storm which is now coming on. We have petitioned - we have remonstrated - we have supplicated - we have prostrated ourselves before the throne, ... Our petitions have been slighted, our remonstrances have produced additional violence and insult; our supplications have been disregarded; and we have been spurned, with contempt, from the foot of the throne. In vain, after all these things, may we indulge the fond hope of peace and reconciliation. THERE IS NO LONGER ANY ROOM FOR HOPE. If we wish to be free ... then we must fight! I repeat - we must fight! An appeal to arms and to the God of Hosts is all that is left us!

They tell us that we are weak - unable to cope with so formidable adversary. But when shall we be stronger? Will it be next week, or next year? Will it be when we are totally disarmed, and when a British guard is stationed in every house? Shall we acquire the means of effectual resistance by lying supinely on our backs, and hugging the elusive phantom of hope, until our enemies have us bound hand and foot? We are not weak, if we make proper use of those means which the God of nature has placed in our power. Three millions of people, armed in the holy cause of liberty, and in such a country as we possess, are invincible by any force which our enemy can send against us. Besides, we shall not fight our battles alone. There is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations, and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us. The battle is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave.

There is no retreat but in submission and slavery. Our chains are forged, their clanking may be heard on the plains of Boston. The war is inevitable - and let it come! I repeat - let it come!

It is in vain to extenuate the matter. Gentlemen may cry, peace, peace - but there is no peace. The war is already begun. The next gale that sweeps from the North will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brothers are already in the field. Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have? Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and salvery? Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take, but as for me, GIVE ME LIBERTY OR GIVE ME DEATH!

Is it any wonder that we sit here today celebrating Liberty Weekend? The symbol of freedom forged by the French but inspired by Patrick Henry is not the American eagle or stars and stripes forever - it is lady liberty in New York harbor! For months now, schoolchildren, immigrants, corporations, and thousands of patriotic Americans have been running, recycling, and "reaching deep" to raise \$265 million to refurbish their lady of liberty. Weds. night President Reagan relighted the new torch of this 100-year old lady. But her scrubbed facade and all the hoopla in the harbor cannot alter the real meaning of this 152-foot facade of filial freedom! Emma Lazarus's words still summarize her spirit:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to
breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your
teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, the tempest-tost
to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

These words are still the truth of lady liberty for the 270,000 allowed American refuge each year - some 30 million between 1880-1930 -- the largest migration in recorded history. And these words came true again Weds. night for 25,000 immigrants who took the oath of citizenship in 44 locations coast to coast. "America, America, God shed his grace on thee; And crown thy good, with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea."

Today the Statue of Liberty yet stands as the strong woman she has been for millions seeking freedom - a woman for all seasons and for all people. Let it never be said that America does not have a great symbol of women's liberation -- for 100 years, a woman has epitomized human freedom! She has reflected a nation committed to religious freedom - a nation whose churches are not mere MUSEUMS as in the motherlands; but MISSION CENTERS which

proclaim a gospel of forgiveness and which multiply loaves and fishes and dollar bills into food for the needy and malnourished. She reflects a nation determined to offer economic freedom and opportunity to all -- where a man can enter with only a suitcase and be buried as the supreme commander and chief. It is no wonder that Lee Iocaca has inspired his best-selling autobiography - a poor immigrant boy becomes the corporate chief of the Chrysler empire.

It is good that we celebrate this Liberty Weekend. America has needed to rally around a symbol of solidarity. The 60's and 70's gave us much needed cultural diversity; but we have needed for a long time to be healed from the fragmentation and fracturing that tore us apart during those decades. And yet, as with any celebration, there is serious caution in this 4-day festival of freedom.

For we must dig deeper into the heart and soul of lady liberty than merely adoring her new nose job or copper cleansing. We must search for the deeper meaning in all these reparations to our lady liberty! Why all the hoopla? Why all the millions? Why? Because for Americans, freedom forever needs renewal and reformation!!

And that kind of free people needs more than a national symbol! For any patriotic shrine can become little more than another golden calf. Lady Liberty runs just that risk - becoming a shrine of yesterday's freedoms, an historic monument to the past, a nostalgic retreat to former successes in order to avoid the present and future freedom fights. The fight for freedom will not be achieved thru this weekend extravaganza in New York harbor or a fabulous fireworks display on the Maumee River. Liberty is certainly a political and national reality, but both are inspired by something much more spiritual. Possibly, gospel songwriter Neil Enloe says it best:

In New York harbor stands a lady,
With torch raised to the sky;
And all who see her know she stands for
Liberty for you and me.

Oh, but the cross is my liberation,
It was there that my soul was set free;
Unashamed I'll proclaim that the old rugged cross
To be my statue of liberty.

Freedom was not given to you or me by a statue or any other nationalistic idol; liberty was given by a life and a death on a cross. And that life and death has inspired many other lives and deaths to insure lasting freedom for you and me. Freedom does not come cheap! It always comes with a price tag - the price tag of responsible servanthood

and sacrifice. For many, that has meant the battlefield. For others, it has been the research laboratory. For Jesus Christ, the price tag was the cross - the ultimate symbol of death!

One author writes: "the most disgusting sign of the ancient world was the symbol of the cross. At the time of Jesus, the cross was synonymous with our present-day electric chair, gas chamber, or guillotine. The cross robbed its victim of all personal dignity while subjecting him to the most barbaric death one could imagine.

But today the symbol of the cross has a totally different meaning: it has the dignity of proclaiming life over death. Because of Jesus Christ, the cross today has become an inspiring symbol of hope and courage. And this change did not take centuries, it was the immediate result of the death of Christ. Is it any wonder that St. Paul proclaims today: "May I never boast except for the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!"

That's why we sing "Lift High the Cross!" on this Liberty Weekend! The cross is no mere patriotic symbol; it is the power of human freedom - liberation from everything that would enslave us. The cross proclaims that we are free to serve God and others -- we are not bound to do it. The cross proclaims that we are free to be the good creatures God intended us to be -- we are not forced to be so. The cross proclaims that we are free to forgive one another, because we have first been forgiven! In the cross we are free -- free from the bondage to the law, free from the slavery of sin, free from the dungeon of death, free from the horror of hell, free from the guillotine of guilt, liberated from anything that would make us slaves! It is the power of the cross that has inspired the political and national liberty of this land!

It is that same cross that has inspired our lady of liberty, as well as our many wars, our righteousness, and even some of our sinfulness. For the cross of Christ has even freed us to sin boldly -- which we have sometimes done in the name of national pride, American virtue, and even American arrogance! But God even forgives such national idolatry! God forbid, he even understands our continuing need to arm ourselves defensively - for in this world, that too is sinfully a part of our fight for freedom!

But the cross takes us well beyond our lady of liberty in another important dimension. As Christians, we sing not merely of freedom from slavery, but we rejoice in being liberated "to serve in love" and thereby insure the freedom of others! St. Paul says: "Stand firm, then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery ... rather, serve one another in love."

Liberty is always in danger of being lost if we merely celebrate historic happenings and past precedents. "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." To lose yourself in loving service and responsibility is the real lamp of liberty!

As Americans, the cross is the power that beckons us never to allow big government to stifle our individual freedom. But likewise, that same cross denounces apartheid and racism as powers which enslave people of color and rob them of individual freedom. Moreover, the cross of Christ makes us freedom fighters for the one out of six children in America living below the poverty level. The cross empowers us to fight against starvation and hunger in Toledo and the whole the world. Likewise, the cross makes us bitter foes of the 40 U.S. corporations who earned 10 billion in profits in 1984 but paid no taxes. And certainly the cross of Christ makes us very vigilant against the religious fanatics on the right and left who want government to enslave us with laws on school prayer, abortion, euthanasia and a host of other issues of personal religious freedom! When will we learn that issues of personal-religious freedom are not the domain of congressional and senatorial legalists in D.C.?

On this Liberty Weekend, we gather around the Summit Table of Ultimate Freedom -- the table of our Lord. As we eat and drink, we are liberated from sin and empowered to free others with the same forgiveness that we have received. This freedom does not mean we can do as we darn please! We are not libertarians! We are soldiers of the cross - free from the slavery of the law in order that we might live by the love of the law! God help us to live this Spirit of liberty, which trusts in God's grace rather than man's imperfection. Or to slightly restate Patrick Henry: "Give us the Liberty of the Cross, or Give us the Death of love for neighbor, for nation, and for the world!"

AMEN.

PENTECOST VII
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
June 29 and July 2, 1989
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"T H E C O L O R S O F F R E E D O M"

But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything or uncircumcision, but a new creation. Peace and mercy be upon all who walk by this rule ... Gal. 6:14-16

The U. S. Supreme Court put itself into scalding water with the American public last week. Can you imagine - the week before July 4th ... the Court ruled that burning the American flag as a protest was a political expression protected by the 1st Amendment. Every day this week the media has reflected America's anger with its highest court. President Bush and many others are advocating a constitutional amendment to forbid the desecration of the flag. Most Americans are lining up with Bush rather than Brennan of the Supreme Court. A WTOL survey showed Toledoans 10 to 1 in favor of an amendment to protect the flag from desecration. The U.S. Senate voted 97-3 in "profound disappointment" with the Supreme Court; the House followed suit with a 411-5 vote. Let's face it -- there aren't too many votes in Congress with such lopsided majorities. It's been a great prelude to the 4th of July; it's even given me the impetus for sermonic fuel.

But the facts are pretty plain, aren't they? THE COLORS OF FREEDOM in the USA are most often red, white, and blue. Old Glory is one of America's greatest symbols of democracy and freedom. You can challenge anything - but don't mess with the flag. It reminds me of a pastor friend who used the sanctuary to do chancel drama. Because of the need for every inch of space - they had to remove the flag from the chancel. An ad-hoc committee was quickly formed to determine if they should discipline the pastor for such desecration of the sanctuary. Finally, the pastor was allowed to offer a word of explanation. He simply said: "I find it strange that nobody mentioned the fact that the cross had also been removed for the play!" There can be little doubt, can there -- many Americans consider the flag more sacred than the cross ... it is truly one of American's greatest symbols.

But let's face it, whether flag or whatever -- we are all inspired by great symbols. In the Lutheran tradition, colors are deeply symbolic of our worship life and faith. This green chasuble symbolizes growth, both in the Pentecost season and thru the sacrament. Even the colors of the flag can offer deep religious significance. Red symbolizes passion, celebration, & martyrdom; white symbolizes purity and victory; blue symbolizes royalty, confidence, and a rich heritage.

Likewise, we often use colors to characterize people. If a person lacks courage - we COLOR him "yellow." When someone is inexperienced, we COLOR her "green." If someone is fascist or narrowminded, we COLOR them "red" or "rednecked." When people are deeply courageous or loyal, we COLOR them "true blue." Colors have become important symbols for individuals, nations, and religious identities.

But personally, I'm a little troubled that so many Americans perceive the red, white, and blue to be the colors of freedom. Because the colors of freedom go so much deeper than any one national symbol or flag. Especially in America, there is a symbol that often stands (hangs) behind the flag that far better reflects THE COLORS OF FREEDOM. That symbol is none other than the cross. I love the American flag; I fly it regularly with respect and honor. But it is not the ultimate expression of my freedom or yours ... and it is not the ultimate reflection of freedom for America. For every flag is too narrow, too nationalistic, too petty, too parochial, too self-indulgent, too superficial, too historically limited in its concern for all God's people. As most of you know, not until 1912 was there any official provision for the stars on the American flag. That means less than 80 years ... this flag has had uniform symbolism for America.

The true COLORS OF FREEDOM were created long before 1912 ... in fact, long before 1777 - when the first American flag was flown. The true colors of freedom were erected not on the islands of Iwo Jima or Okinawa - but on the hill of Golgatha. Here was displayed the true colors of freedom -- conviction, courage, and crucifixion. Ever since that moment on the skull -- any person, any nation, any people seeking true freedom has lived by the colors of Jesus Christ. Those colors are not visible hues on national flags or notable faces; those colors are not created by facsimile machines or marketing managers. The colors of Golgatha are the internal colors of God's spirit enfleshed within the life of Christ and all who claim him as Lord. So if you want the colors of freedom - you don't buy a flag, you offer your life as a disciple of Christ.

And first, He gives you the color of conviction! And how does he do that? He asks you a question: what is God's greatest cause ... God's greatest motivation for the world? According to the Jews of Paul's day - God's greatest cause was being bound to certain, external religious practices. Specifically, you weren't fully convicted to God until you were circumcised. That was hardly freedom, but instead slavery to a religious system. St. Paul says to the Galatians: "God's cause is not circumcision or uncircumcision, but being a new creation in the world."

That's Christ's answer for every disciple of freedom -- become convicted to a new creation of the world. Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose again to make all things new!

He was fully convicted to God's cause! The life of Christ was much like the life of a Chinese woman condemned to die because of her conviction to freedom from Communism. Her relatives surrounded her on the day of execution; they came to sob with her. But she turned to them without a tear and said: "Please don't weep for me, but weep for yourselves. I am dying for God's cause of freedom. You will continue to live -- but for what??"

The true color of freedom in America has always been CONVICTION TO GOD'S CAUSE OF A NEW CREATION. The colonists who came to America came convicted to "making all things new" - to be freed from religious idolatry, social insecurity, and the cultural conformity of their worlds. To what cause are we as Americans convicted today?? What idolatry, what slavery, what exploitation has caused us to be less than God's intention -- less than God's new creation for the world?? Jesus Christ came to convict us to be new creations for this world. That is the true color of our Christian freedom ... and hopefully, our American freedom.

But God has given us more than Christ's conviction; he has also shown us Christ's color of courage. It's easy enough to say "I am convicted to God's cause," but how do you and I get the courage and strength to fulfill our convictions?!

I am reminded of the story of the little boy who was helping his dad clear their farmland of large rocks. He was trying desperately to lift a heavy boulder but couldn't budge it. Finally his father said, "Are you sure you're using all your strength?" The boy cried, "Yes, I am." "No you aren't" responded the father, "you haven't asked me to help you yet!!"

The color of courage and strength is not automatically dispensed with creation ... nor does it come from pledging allegiance to mere symbols. Jesus was deeply convicted to God's cause, but before he went into battle with Satan or other worldly powers ... he prayed (asked) for courage: "Not my will, but thine be done!" Before Jesus ever sought to make anything or anyone new, he asked for help from his father.

The courage from within comes from the confidence of the help from beyond the self. We are courageous to do God's mission only because he promises to provide the help when we ask. That was classically illustrated by our own Renovation Committee this week. After painfully laboring over the contractor's bids and eliminating any non-essentials -- the cost for renovation came to \$264,000 -- nearly \$14,000 more than was reflected on Sunday, May 7th. The Committee asked, what shall we do?? Do we have to call another meeting to authorize this additional \$14,000?? To be perfectly legalistic - the answer would be "yes!" But the Committee leaders said: what was the true spirit of the congregation?

The congregation overwhelming voted to "move ahead." Thus a committee member said: "We must have the courage to act by what we perceive to be the spirit of Hope's people -- confident that when we ask, God will provide faithfully through this same people." Every decision of life, whether by committee or individual, runs the risk of failure or defeat for being too courageous. But as for me, I'll take the courage of God's help anyday ... the courage to move ahead TO MAKE THINGS NEW FOR HIS GLORY!!

Finally, Christ gives us the color of crucifixion. Without the cross, humanity is destined to make the stuff of this world the real glory of life. And once we pledge to allegiance to the stuff of the world - we become enslaved to self-indulgence, to lust for power, to dominion over others, and to an obsession with the "flesh" -- a lusting after material and physical things. That's why our gospel reminds us: "we reap what we sow." In short, one of our greatest slaveries is ONLY to desire to be served and ONLY to acquire ... to make materialism our worldly cause. And every civilization that has suffered that form of slavery has either been crushed from without or has decayed from within.

Jesus Christ hung on the cross to free us from such slavery. Jesus Christ hung on the cross to free us from anything that might dominate us other than the love of God. Jesus Christ hung on the cross so that we might be for the love of others as he was for the love of others. Jesus Christ hung on the cross so that we might crucify anything that would make us less than a new creation of God!! That's why St. Paul says - "But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of Christ, by which the world has been crucified in me, and I to the world."

Certainly, this is a weekend to give honor and respect to the colors of Old Glory! LIFT HIGH THE RED, WHITE, AND BLUE; LET NATIONAL FREEDOM EXPLODE! But let us never consider THESE man-made colors to be the true reflection of freedom. The authentic colors of freedom were given in the flesh ... and have always been enfleshed ever since. It is through the conviction, the courage, and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ that we see the true colors of freedom. Let us glorify God that not only Americans, but all disciples of Christ are the true recipients and dutiful soldiers of God's new creation of freedom for the world.

AMEN.

PENTECOST VII
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
July 4 & 7, 1991 (July 4th Weekend)
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

W H E N R E J E C T I O N B E C O M E S R E C E P T I O N !

And God said to Ezekiel: Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels, who have rebelled against me; they and their fathers transgressed against me to this very day. The people are also impudent and stubborn: I send you to them; and you shall say to them, "Thus says the Lord God." And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are rebellious) they will know that there has been a prophet among them. (Ezek. 2:3-5) And they took offense at Jesus. And he said to them, "A prophet is without honor in his own country, and among his own kind, and in his own house.

Mark 6:4-5

I have vivid memories of my first trip back to my hometown from seminary; back to Oshkosh, Wis. to preach my first sermon after a year of seminary. Of course, seminarians (as we know from Denny and Paul) always perceive themselves as the utmost of humble wisdom (which translated means they always feel they know a lot more than the home pastor ... and certainly a lot more if he's been out of seminary for 20 years). But even with this twinge of pompous pride (which I too possessed) the sermonic proclamation in Oshkosh was anything but an explosive revelation. Quite to the contrary - it was a total bomb ... a total bust from beginning to end.

But it was not only due to my youth and inexperience. If I might boast a little - the sermon was delivered with my usual sweaty gusto ... it was crafted with adequate coherence and clarity ... and it was preached with prophetic passion. And that's where I really bombed out! The precise problem was that it was too prophetic. Like all prophetic preaching -- it was a challenging call for God's liberty and justice for all! And that CALL made a lot of sense in light of my living in south Chicago for the past 14 months. Poverty for me was not some dirty word about primitive people living in the jungles of Africa; poverty was the lifestyle I faced every day all around me. And this was 1968 - the year of two tragic assassinations and Chicago's Democratic Convention. As a seminarian - I had been called to duty as a medic for the potential trouble in Grant Park; never did I realize I would be dodging billy clubs and tear gas cannisters as part of my democratic duty that night. And of course, living in south Chicago meant going to sleep every night surrounded by urban blight -- cockroaches, rats, and criminals were more than topics for polite conversation around our coffee table. In short, I came to Oshkosh to challenge what I had been taught to believe as a child -- that America was a great land of liberty and justice FOR ALL. I believed that was not only God's vision for America; I also believed that was God's mission for his faithful people. But somewhere between 1942 and 1968 ... and somewhere between Oshkosh and Chicago -- that vision had become abandoned & desecrated in the cities of America.

So there I was in good old Oshkosh, Wisconsin. The people were expecting to hear their "proper-little-old-smiling-Peter" that they had known ever since he left Oshkosh in 1964 to become a high school teacher and later seminarian. But the Peter who had returned to Oshkosh had been transformed by a new experience of God and by a new prophetic experience "of justice and liberty for all." And even though he loved his country and his church more in 1968 than he had in 1964 -- his prophetic vision felt "very far out" for the folks of St. Andrew's, Oshkosh.

Hopefully, this personal illustration helps give clarity to a similar scene when Jesus returned to his hometown, Nazareth. Is it any wonder that these people found his prophetic words and his miraculous actions "beyond belief." They had known Jesus as a carpenter's son ... as a furniture craftsman -- not as a messenger of God. Is it any wonder that Jesus said: "A prophet is without honor in his own country and among his own kin." God's call for Jesus was to offer liberty and justice and healing to all. In short, he was to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth to the Nazarites, even if the truth hurt. And let's face it - most of the Nazarites didn't want to hear the truth ... and certainly not if it was critical or hurtful ... and certainly not from that carpenter's kid who was always wet behind the ears anyway.

Recently, Martin Robbins, Vice President for University Relations, offered a prophetic observation about Toledo which shows that not much has changed since Jesus' days in Nazareth. Mr. Robbins considers Toledo to be his new home, even though he has only lived here 1-1/2 years. But he is a prophetic voice in Toledo. He said that "Toledo is a place that is internally referenced -- meaning, that change only comes in Toledo when it is done by Toledoans. As a newcomer he said it has become very obvious that Toledo is unwilling to listen to voices outside of those voices that it has been hearing for decades." Robbins concluded: "In an increasingly complex and competitive international economy, the lack of external voices is a very dangerous reality for Toledo." And we all know how external "prophetic" voices are "heard" in Toledo. Phil Hawkey did not survive because he was not internally referenced. The Blade continues to scandalize personalities and events rather than celebrating their visionary impact upon Toledo's future. When the city seeks new political or educational leadership -- it resorts to the old "buddy network" rather than seeking the best that can be found in America. Is it any wonder that Marty Robbins concludes: "Toledo marches to the beat of a different drummer, and that drummer is always a Toledoan."

Believe me - I am deeply grateful that Robbins' assessment is not true for all Toledo. For the people of Hope had a vision that went beyond Toledo -- they called a Badger rather than a Buckeye or Wolverine or Toledo Rocket. I hope in some small way that has meant that I have been able to give a prophetic vision to this congregation that would not have been possible from an internally referenced pastor. In fact,

it was for that very reason that Dennis Hartman wasn't even considered for our call as Associate Pastor. Lutheranism in Toledo has a history of calling back Toledo pastors to Toledo. I don't think that has been real healthy for Toledo or the Lutheran church in Toledo. Denny Hartman was a hometown boy of Hope Lutheran. As Jesus says, "No prophet is truly accepted in his own home or among his own kin." What Jesus is saying is that Denny Hartman could not be a prophet in this congregation. He could be the nice-little-old-Denny that everyone remembers from the muffler shop, but he could not speak the prophetic word of God "because the hometown folks would say exactly what they said about Jesus: How dare that muffler man's son tell me the meaning of liberty and justice for all!" Pastor Hartman is no longer "little Denny" - he is a prophet sent by God to transform God's people ... to turn them around and make them a new creation of God.

Of course, prophetic vision is not only a pastoral matter. Not only does the church often reject its prophets, but so does the culture. The Wright Brothers workshop in Dayton, Ohio was only recently restored three years ago in 1988. Years ago nobody believed they would ever get their flying machine off the ground, esp. their father who was a minister. He said that if God wanted people to fly he would have given them wings (he wasn't much of a pastoral prophet, was he?). Wilbur and Orville, looking to a visionary future - went to North Carolina, where they would not be treated as hometown boys ... and their dream became a reality that has drastically changed the world of travel.

Over the years many of you have been avid Lawrence Welk fans. As a child, Welk knew music was his calling. In his teens, he bought an accordian, but he had to work four years on his father's farm to pay for it. He rented a local opera house in his hometown and tried to sell concert tickets. But the hometown audience wouldn't come out to see him - so he took his show on the road. His father told him he wouldn't last for six weeks. Welk now has millions that would come out to see him in any hometown.

Jesus Christ received the same rejection from his hometown folks. Like many throughout history, he was not seen at home for what he had become but rather for what he had been -- the kid of a poor carpenter. And the prophetic truth of God cannot be told or heard if the messenger is still perceived as a carpenter's kid. So what did Jesus do with this dilemma. He did what God has instructed every prophet to do -- MOVE ON WITH THE SAME MESSAGE AND ACTIONS TO ANOTHER PLACE WHERE YOU WILL BE SEEN FOR WHAT YOU REALLY ARE ... A MESSENGER WHO BRINGS LIBERTY AND JUSTICE TO ALL. Jesus did not become a cry baby in Nazareth, pitying himself because of hometown rejection. Nor did he become as some did in the 60's a social and political freak who had nothing but doom and gloom to offer to the whole world. Instead he simply moved ahead with the only thing that God had given him: THE CONVICTION THAT GOD'S MERCIFUL LOVE AND FORGIVENESS WOULD MAKE THIS WORLD A PLACE OF LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL.

That's the only way THAT REJECTION BECOMES RECEPTION -- BY CONVICTION--BY BEING FAITHFUL TO GOD'S VISION OF RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR THE WORLD. It sounds almost old-fashioned, but there's still only ONE WAY that liberty and justice can be given to all in this world. It comes through BELIEF ... BELIEF THAT THIS IS GOD'S VISION FOR THE WORLD ... BELIEF THAT THIS IS GOD'S MISSION FOR YOU AND ME IN THE WORLD ... BELIEF THAT GOD HAS GIVEN EACH OF US THE PROPHETIC TORCH OF LIBERTY AND JUSTICE TO CARRY TO EVERY CORNER OF THE WORLD.

Jesus believed. Everything Jesus said and did reflected his belief in this vision from God. He believed that his mission was God-given and God-inspired. That's been the profile of every prophet since Jesus -- it's a person who lives believing that he or she has a God-given and God-inspired mission in this world. Namely, to bring liberty and justice to all. That kind of mission is not something that you and I do for a living; rather, we do it because God has said that this world CAN NO LONGER LIVE WITHOUT IT.

Isn't that the basis of our celebration every 4th of July weekend? American independence was a prophetic vision given and inspired by God. God's prophetic vision was to show that grace means democracy rather than domination; to live under his grace meant there could be only one choice: INDEPENDENCE, for it was the only way to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in this land. We continue to live as benefactors of those faithful forefathers who lived and died to insure this prophetic spirit of God in this country.

This weekend President Bush has called upon Americans to honor and thank those who fought in the Persian Gulf. THERE CERTAINLY HAS BEEN NO REJECTION OF OUR AMERICAN HOMETOWN GUYS & GALS THIS TIME!! Why is that we have so willingly honored the troops from the Persian Gulf when we were so unwilling to honor our troops from Viet Nam?? I have no absolute answer for this question, but this much can be said: most Americans PERCEIVED THE GULF WAR AS A PROPHETIC CALL FROM GOD. They believed it had a God inspired purpose (even though we all know there is no such thing as a God-inspired war). Maybe it relates to what FDR said in 1935 to Congress: "The driving force of a nation is not in its armaments but in its spiritual purpose." Somehow, Americans perceived that the Gulf War had a spiritual purpose -- it was viewed as a prophetic call for liberty and justice for the people of the middle east. If you saw Bob Simon's BACK TO BAGHDAD special on Thursday night - you realize that the aftermath of this war has clearly questioned whether there were any spiritual victories in this war. Military victories, yes! Military honors, yes! But spiritual victories - democratic victories - probably none! But even with the verdict being questionable - there is one PERCEPTION that remains a certainty for most Americans: THIS WAR WAS A SPIRITUAL CAUSE ... IT WAS A PROPHETIC CALL FOR LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR A PEOPLE WHO HAD BEEN CAPTIVES TO RUTHLESS REGIMES! AND AS WAS SHOWN THURSDAY NIGHT ... EVEN AFTER A BLOODY WAR ... THOSE PEOPLE ARE STILL WAITING TO BE DELIVERED FROM THE TYRANNY OF THEIR DESTRUCTIVE DICTATORS!

To be the body of Christ at Hope Lutheran means that the driving force of our existence is that same spiritual purpose ... not only on the 4th of July, but every single day of the year. This is the place where "liberty and justice for all" must be lived and experienced every time we gather ... this is the place where God vehemently prophesies against any "buddy system or clickishness or favoritism or atmosphere which reflects some being "out" others being "in"... this is a place where every newcomer to Toledo should experience a warm welcome and never-ending hospitality ... this is a place where white and black, rich and poor, wierd and normal, young and old kneel around the same table of fellowship and are given the same acceptance by God and each other ... this is the place where the world looks when it wants to know the meaning of liberty and justice for all. And if the world doesn't find the proper and prophetic meaning here -- then we know we've got a long way to go before we sleep.

And we who are honest with God and ourselves know the real PROPHETIC TRUTH ... we have not yet achieved His prophetic vision and mission for us ... we still have a long way to go before we sleep. But one thing is for certain for anyone who enters into this place -- he or she will not be able to leave without saying "that there has been a prophet among them this day." And when we willingly can say and celebrate that ... REJECTION BECOMES RECEPTION ... and liberty and justice for all continues AS our spiritual cause.

AMEN.

PENTECOST VII
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
July 15 & 18, 1993
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

HOW DO Y O U SPELL RELIEF?

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!"

Many of you may remember my telling her story before, but I have found no better parable to illustrate THE YOKE OF RELIGIOUS SLAVERY. She was in her late forties. She had been living in virtual "hell" for 30 years. She had been in and out of institutions frequently in that 30-yr period. And it all went back to that heavy yoke during her teen-age years. The religious intentions were well-intended, but they had strangled her for the rest of her life.

She had been raised in a very strict, fundamentalistic Iowa home. Her parents were extremely religious & respected in the community. But their focus of religion was to drill into this child's head THE TERROR OF GOD ... the awful terror of sin & hell. They did not have much time to show warmth & affection because they were consumed with pointing out all of the putrid sinfulness of life. Never, never did they miss an opportunity to demonstate the terror of God upon those who had fallen short of God's glory & goodness.

So it is that this woman grew up knowing only God's terror and vengeance - but deeply yearning for affection & tenderness. She just needed someone who would hold her and comfort her and make her feel "cared about" rather than terrorized. Finally he came. He was a high school classmate who asked her to go out for her first date. For the first time that night, she was shown affection in a harmless way. The experience was beautiful and more life-giving than she had ever known. In fact, they were having such a good time that they had lost track of the hour. It was now 1 a.m. in the morning. The young man frantically drove her home and dropped her off without even a good night kiss.

As she entered the front vestibule, her mother was waiting like an avenging beast. She demanded that her daughter get down and confess her sinfulness - her absolute degradation and whatever other acts of evil she had done. Finally her mother demanded that she beat herself while crying out loud: "O God, spare me from the jaws of hell!"

This woman was now 49. She was a woman who could never have children; she was a woman who was terrified of men; she was a woman who was not only afraid of making love, but afraid of any expression of warm affection. She was a woman who had known 30 years of hopeless psychiatric treatment. She was a woman who had been destroyed by a legalistic, moralistic interpretation of religion. She had sought to perfect herself by her parents' view of Christ for 30 years, and she had failed. Where would she ever find relief?

This same kind of religious and cultural slavery was known to the peasants of Matthew's day -- who made up 95% of his audience. They had been harnessed by the Pharaoh's oppressive grip in Egypt and by King Nebuchenezzar's stiffling reign in Babylon. After returning to the promised land, these Jewish peasants were yoked to landowners who had total control over their lives, to scribes & Pharisees who terrorized them with perfectionistic religion, and to the heavy hand of Roman rule & domination. Is it any wonder that Jesus would say to this woman or to the peasants of his own day: "Come unto me, all you that are weary and are carrying heaven burdens, and I will give you rest."

Unlike this woman or the peasants of Matthew's day - most of us here tonite are not BURDENED by rigid parenting or foreign domination or religious terrorism. But let us not fool ourselves into thinking that we are therefore without any heavy burdens. Some 25 million or more of us have high blood pressure. More than a million of us will have a heart attack this year. Some 8 million of us are now suffering with ulcers. More than 12 million of us will become alcoholics this year. And our local pharmacists are currently filling more than 230 million prescriptions for tranquilizers to get us through 1993. So Jesus' words are not only to peasants or to a terrorized woman. He is speaking to you & to me when he says: "Come to me YOU who are weary & carrying heavy burdens, and I will give YOU rest."

So, if we are not suffering from foreign domination or religious terrorism, then what is this heavy burden from which we need relief? There is a story of a Swiss watchmaker who decided to keep an accurate account of the way he spent his time during his lifetime. He did his calculations over a period of years and discovered, as we might expect, that he had spent the equivalent of 26 years in bed. He had further spent about 21 years at work (probably that's 25 years for workaholics like me). About six years of his life was spent eating (for some of us that might be 9 or 10). But his greatest discovery -- nearly five years of his life had been spent being angry, bitter, complaining about others, bearing grudges, being plagued with hatred or guilt.

In other words, he had totally wasted five full years of his life. Can any of us identify with this Swiss timekeeper? Why is it that we are so often bound by anger -- bound to our own rebellion against God and others? Why do we so willingly carry around the agony of this burden? Like Paul says, "I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it!" Why do we allow madness - rebellion against God - sin to control our lives? Which one of us can honestly say that he/she does not need relief from this madness?

Yes, unlike the peasants of Jesus' day, we may no longer be yoked to slavery or foreign oppression. But we are still suffering from a bondage to madness and sin -- to the yokes of discrimination and hatred and greed and indifference.

And one of the greatest madnesses of our day is that we are so often bound to everyone else's opinions of everything. We are constantly trying to live up to the next person's expectations of what it means to be SOMEBODY in 1993. And when you're trying to be somebody in 1993 you don't follow the Way or the Truth of Jesus Christ! That's too parochial ... that's not pluralistic enough. If you want to be somebody in 1993, then you have to conform to what's viewed as "politically correct" ... YOU GO ALONG WITH "who's in and what's out" for this moment of history. After all, there is no greater "truth" than what happens to be the latest fad in cultural or intellectual correctness.

This madness of conformity (which of course is never viewed as conformity) is classically illustrated in one of Aesop's stories of a man and his son leading a donkey to town. As they were passing some young girls, the old man overheard one of them saying: "Look at that old fool! At least one of them could be riding that stubborn mule." So the father quickly put his son on the donkey.

As they went further, they passed a group of women at a luncheon meeting. And one of the ladies spoke out loudly saying: "Look at that young brat riding the donkey while his elderly father trudges along on foot." So the father stopped the donkey and joined his son on its back.

Not long after passing the women they came to a group of street laborers. One of them yelled to the others: "Hey guys! I'd say that's a terribly cruel thing to do to an old mule. Obviously, that is far too much weight for that beast to bear. Those two ought to be carrying that old donkey!"

At that point, the father dismounted with his son and they tied the animals legs to a pole across their shoulders. And the two of them trudged along with the burden of the donkey between them until they reached a bridge. On the bridge, people began laughing and ridiculing this peculiar sight of man carrying beast. The noise and commotion totally unsettled the donkey who began to fight to be free from the bar. As the crowd laughed ever harder, the father and son lost their balance and the donkey slipped off the pole, over the bridge, & into the river below and drowned. (And to this day the question still remains: Who was the real jackass?)

This story classically illustrates - we are not only burdened by our own madness ... by our own rebellion against God. We are also burdened by everybody else's madness -- by constantly attempting to conform to everyone else's expectations and views and portfolios of perfection.

And what does all this illustrate?? We can never find relief by our own efforts or the expectations of others. Just like the man and his son, the more we try the sillier we look. And the ultimate madness (sin) is when we think that we can achieve perfection and glory through our own righteous

acts; our own visions of perfection; our own valiant attempts to live up to the expectations of others. Not only is all of this madness, but it is the cause for the greatest burden of our lives: SEEKING TO CLAIM PERFECTION BY OURSELVES AND OUR OWN ACTS OF RIGID REVERENCE. AS GRAPHICALLY ILLUSTRATED IN MY FIRST STORY, RIGID REVERENCE NEVER LEADS TO RELIEF.

(Even those of us who are occasionally called REVEREND ... those of us who have taken special vows of ordination to serve with singleness of mind and heart -- we too know that we stray and wander and fail to live up to the whole truth and nothing but the truth. We suffer from the same madness that is waging war within everyone: "We do not do what we want, but often do the very thing we hate." By our own efforts ... by our ordination vows ... by our preaching and teaching ... by our holy words and pompous gestures -- none of these works will make us perfect! NONE will give us relief from the madness of sin and rebellion!)

There is only ONE SOURCE OF RELIEF! Jesus says: "Come to me, all who are burdened with guilt and frustrations and imperfections and struggles in your lives. I WILL GIVE YOU RELIEF! Take upon you my YOKE, for my yoke is not a burden that you must carry alone. Rather, it is my support of mercy, compassion & forgiveness that will always be with you; you will never be alone or terrorized again! Yes, my YOKE is not a burden of terror, it is the power of the cross, it is the grace of forgiving love. (BAPTISM) For my yoke is easy - meaning, it is well-fitted, it is perfectly suited for sin ... it is a YOKE OF FORGIVENESS & MERCY, not a burden of greater terror! And this yoke is light--meaning, it relieves guilt and frees us to love ourselves and others.

So, How Do YOU spell relief?? Some spell it, "R - O - L - A - I - D - S." That certainly spells relief from indigestion. But if we are looking for RELIEF from our own madness; FROM our own rebellion against God and others; FROM a never-ending obsession with living up to the expectations of others ... THEN THERE IS ONLY ONE WAY TO SPELL RELIEF. It is spelled: J E S U S C H R I S T. Because only Jesus Christ relieves the terror of our imperfections and failures and all the other madnesses that we create by our greed and discrimination and indifference and hatred.

It's like the Sunday School class that was discussing Jesus' invitation "To Come ... and take his Yoke upon us!" The teacher asked: "What is a Yoke?" One child responded: "It's something they put on cows' necks to make their work easier." Well the teacher asked, "What then is the yoke of Jesus Christ!" There was a long, long silence. Finally, a little 4-yr old girl volunteered, "The Yoke of Christ is putting God's arms around our necks and hugging us without ever stopping!"

After 23 years of preaching - little 4-yr old girls still PREACH IT THE BEST: "The Yoke of Christ is putting God's arms around our necks and hugging us WITHOUT EVER STOPPING!"

Pentecost VII
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
July 6, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

"WHEN WEAK BECOMES STRONG!"

And the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. ... Therefore," Paul said, "I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, I am strong."
2 Corinthians 12:9-10

The 4th of July weekend -- a time for America to flex her muscle. And in Toledo, it's also always the time for the LPGA golfers to flex their muscle at Highland Meadows. These are uplifting examples of muscle flexing -- parades, fireworks, and waming a golf ball on freshly mowed grass. If these were the only ways that people boasted about human greatness - St. Paul would have probably never written today's lesson comparing the weak to the strong.

But last weekend we saw a graphic example of how muscle-flexing can actually be a very troubling sign of insecurity and sickness. Mike Tyson, feeling unfairly "head butted," resorted to biting off part of Evander Holyfield's ear. Forgive me for this gruesome example - but no better case can be made for the dangers of macho-muscle-flexing. When our major goal in life is to "prove that we are on top ... that we are totally in charge ... that we have all the power ... that we are truly the macho men or women of the world" -- then we're confronting signs of suffering & sickly times for us and our world! Because often this is a serious symptom of our unwillingness to admit or to cover up our warts & weaknesses.

St. Paul had such a weakness--he called it a "thorn" in the flesh. He was tempted to publicly deny that thorn and focus instead upon a "vision of the third heaven" -- some marvelous out-of-body-spiritual experience he had had! He was tempted to boast about this "mighty experience" to prove that he was one of the greatest apostles. In his gut - Paul wanted to be the epitome of strength as an apostle -- but in his heart he knew he had many weaknesses -- the greatest of which was this thorn. The "thorn was never deliniated; some say it was an eye ailment; others claim it was akin to epilepsy. Whatever--it reminded Paul that he was not quite the macho man that he sometimes wanted to be.

The thorn for Paul served as God's reality instruction in humility: hardships, imperfections and weaknesses are no cause for giving up on God or giving up on life. In fact, weaknesses & imperfections are really one of our greatest sources of truth for living: they alert us that we can't make it alone at anytime or anywhere without God's help! Paul's "thorn" represents a bottom line message for all every life: "Sooner or later all of us will be backed up to the wall of human weakness! So recognize before it's too late that we all need help!"

The Corinthians never perceived that reality because they were always too busy flaunting themselves in the mirror. Their's was a narcissistic culture ... always destined to show itself as "more superior & more sophisticated" than any other. This culture thrived on bragging about its greatness over all others!

And yet we all know the bottom line for people and nations which never cease to boast about themselves: **MOST OFTEN THESE ARE SERIOUS SIGNS OF WEAKNESS.** People who must always intimidate or overpower others in order to feel o.k. about themselves are usually suffering from the greatest weakness of all: fear & insecurity. People who are afraid of being found out to be truly human, truly vulnerable are most often unwilling to do the most heroic and courageous thing a human being can do: **ASK FOR HELP!**

The classic biblical story about the Pharisee and tax collector illustrates how the one who was weak was really the one who was strong. The Pharisee proudly stood in the temple reminding God of his many good deeds; while the tax collector pressed his face to the floor and pleaded: "God have mercy on me, I'm a sinner." The tax collector revealed life's greatest truth -- there's always help from God and others "when we ask for it!" And conversely -- there's rarely any help for those who try to impress us that they've got it all together -- they don't need God or anyone else!!

It's like the little boy who was trying a lift a stone much too heavy for himself. His father asked him, "Are you using all your strength!" The boy said he was giving it all he had. Then the father answered, "No you aren't; you haven't asked me to help you yet!" The boy had forgotten that his greatest source of strength was help from dad. That's God's message through Paul today: "When you're up against the wall because of your weakness, ask for the sufficient grace of God to give you a hand!"

And where do we find that sufficient grace? Obviously - in God's sacraments ... in God's teachings ... but most especially, from God's faithful servants. (On Sat., GW members gave reception) If you're looking for grace - then find a faithful Christian: a person who will bless you with kindness, compassion & love. And yet - why do we often hear just the opposite from church folk? When they need help, too often they'll say, "I didn't want to bother you!" That's not the lesson that Christ taught St. Paul. Today's text teaches us to bother one another on a regular basis if we want to experience the grace of God. It may be a pastor, a friend, a well-known or unknown member -- but it's the willingness to ask FOR HELP that turns "weakness into strength!"

It took me nearly 30 years in pastoral ministry to learn that "when I am weak, I am really strong!" In other words, "I can't be totally in charge if I really want God's grace & help to reign supreme!" God can only help when I allow him to work through a multitude of other people. I am too weak, too limited, too imperfect, too self-centered at times to really show the fulness of God's grace. In fact--that's why Glenwood has all kinds of sign-up areas called, WE NEED YOUR HELP! Because as long as we rely upon only a few in this church to do the ministry -- this congregation will remain weak ... it will suffer from the insufficient grace of God. But when everyone sees his or her role as God's partner in grace, then what was thought to be weak becomes really strong.

It's like the golf enthusiast who was describing the difficulty of driving a ball over the ditch or bunker that lays between the fairway and the green. The rookie responded, "Well, why don't they just 'fill in' the ditch with sod ... it would make the shot a lot easier." The point is that "ditches" or "bunkers" are important in golf and in life. Golf would be totally boring without any bunkers or water traps. These are the obstacles of golf that challenge and force golfers to concentrate.

Likewise, the bunkers or weaknesses of life remind us of our true humanity-- that life is a constant challenge that cannot be lived with a macho mentality of making it over the course without any help! Sometimes that help come from private lessons; sometimes that help comes from practice rounds; sometimes our only help is to realize that we don't have the physical strength to make it over the ditches and that we must lay up in front of them. But in the process we learn that God accepts us with our weaknesses in order that we learn from them and gain greater potential for our next round or encounter.

That was certainly the case for Fred Astaire. At his first casting session he received the comments: "Can't act; can't sing; and dances only a little!" In 1902, the Atlantic Monthly returned a batch of poems penned by a 28-yr old named Robert Frost saying, "Our magazine has no space for your stupid, vigorous verse." In 1905, the University of Bern failed Albert Einstein's PhD dissertation because it was "too fanciful and irrelevant." Imagine if these great people had allowed those brief moments of weakness to dictate their future. Instead, they sought the sufficient grace of God: that God would surely help them (and us) thru our every moment of doubt, failure, rejection or weakness.

When we are weak we become strong through the help of God's forgiveness, God's guidance, and God's support & gifts from others. In other words, God can use human weakness to create human strength: **BECAUSE ONCE WE ADMIT WE NEED HELP -- GOD PROMISES HELP WILL BE ON THE WAY ... for that is His whole purpose in giving us the Body of Christ!!**

May God bless us with renewed strength through our willingness to admit to each other that we are weak ... for God's power can only be made perfect & strong when we are courageous enough to admit that we need help!!

AMEN.