

*Yoke of Right or Wrong*  
14<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time  
July 05, 2020  
Trinity Bixby  
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

Matthew 11:11-19, 25-29 (CEB)  
Romans 7:15-25a (NLT)

Yesterday was the Fourth of July, a day when Americans celebrate gaining our independence from Great Britain, and the establishment of the United States of America. Those stories are told all throughout the world, showing what people can do when they join together in common cause, and the decisions of the founders are heralded as amazing expressions of liberty and governance. But since it's the day after the Fourth of July, let's talk a bit about what happened next! Right after the revolution, the new United States immediately disbanded their standing army and navy, believing that they could conscript soldiers and ships in times of war, so there was no need to spend the national budget on military needs. And then, they learned why it was important to keep at least some ships for defense – piracy. While Britain had acknowledged the independence of the USA at the end of the revolutionary war, many nations of the world did not, which left American commercial shipping vulnerable to pirates.

So, the government reformed a national navy, with the express purpose of defeating pirates – and the year that the navy was reformed, a young man named Stephen Decatur, Jr. joined as a midshipman, working his way up to Lieutenant by 1804. That year, pirates from the Ottoman Empire and Tripoli, known as the “Barbary Pirates,” had captured the USS Philadelphia and enslaved its crew after it ran into an uncharted reef off the coast of Tripoli. Decatur volunteered to lead a group of sailors to either recapture or destroy the ship, and they were successful at destroying it, by sneaking into the harbor on a captured Tripolitan ship, and lighting the Philadelphia on fire. Decatur, though he was just 25 years old, was promoted to Captain for this daring act, the youngest to ever hold the rank. During

the war of 1812, he successfully captured several British ships while the majority of the US fleet was under blockade. He was captured by the British, but returned to US service after the war, eventually capturing the flagship of the Barbary Pirates, using the victory to get a treaty from Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis, which ended the majority of the piracy at that time. <sup>1</sup>

When Decatur returned home for a celebration of his victories, he reportedly said, “Our country! In her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong.” This is, as best we can tell from the historical record, the first public use of the expression, “our country, right or wrong.” A toast, to hard-won peace, after decisions both right and wrong had been made.

But how are decisions about right and wrong supposed to be judged? Many of the decisions made at the founding of the country seemed right at the time – but, through time, have been found to be wrong. Even in the moment, though, it can be difficult to do the right thing, even when you know what it is. The apostle Paul makes that exact point in the seventh chapter of his letter to Rome, writing, “I want to do what is good, but I don’t. I don’t want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway... I love God’s law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind...Who will free me from this life, that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ, our Lord.”

Paul knew that no human alone can carry the burdens of life – for, as he writes in the same letter, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”<sup>2</sup> Sin, for Paul, was a powerful force, like a whirlpool in the sea – once you start spiraling down, there’s no way out, without great assistance from outside. Some of us feel like we’re further down the whirlpool than others, but we all need the same external assistance – the good grace of God, the Spirit that fills our sails and returns us to the great seas of life.

But, wind alone is not the only way to avoid a whirlpool. You can also avoid

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen\\_Decatur](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Decatur)

<sup>2</sup> Romans 3:23

them by careful sailing, or by lashing yourself to a solid object outside of its influence. Careful sailing is what Paul describes as “the law of God” – following the commandments of God helps to minimize or avoid the worst of the whirlpools. But we humans tend to steer toward whatever we’re looking at – and whirlpools are deadly attractive, just like Sin appears from the outside. It’s easy to rationalize, “Hey, if I just go around the edge of this whirlpool, I’ll go faster!” Likewise, “If I just sin a little bit, I can accomplish a much greater good!” Once you’re in the current, though, you get pulled along, bit by bit, until you learn that you, on your own, can’t escape. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican theologian Thomas Fuller puts it most eloquently: “It is dangerous to gather flowers that grow on the banks of the pit of hell, for fear of falling in; yea, they which play with the devil’s rattles, will be brought by degrees to wield his sword.”<sup>3</sup>

Stephen Decatur, unfortunately, found this out at the end of his life. Decatur had served on the court martial for a man named James Barron, and Barron, after being reinstated to the navy 5 years later, challenged Decatur to a duel. Although the US Navy already was suffering from a lack of leadership due to dueling, the 41-year-old Decatur accepted the duel, and chose a man he thought to be his friend as his second. Though Barron and Decatur were willing to apologize and not duel each other, their seconds ignored their requests, and instead arranged the duel in a most deadly manner, with both duelists closely facing each other, waiting only on the countdown to fire. As a result, both were shot, and Decatur would die of his wounds later that night. His pride was his undoing, ending his life well before his time.

How, then, can we be assured of finding our way out of the whirlpool of sin? We can be lashed to the one who doesn’t fear the storm, who walks across the face of water itself. Indeed, in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus calls the disciples and all who hear him to take up his yoke. To our ears today, this is a really weird statement – who would want to be yoked, harnessed to pull a wagon? But, remember, that in Jesus’ day, when a Jewish teacher spoke of their “yoke,” they meant the tradition of

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<sup>3</sup> (Fuller 1642, 344) – often mistakenly attributed to physicist Buckminster Fuller

interpretation that they followed. When a Rabbi called on someone to follow them, the new follower was said to have “taken up the yoke” of that Rabbi – and these “yokes” were described as light or heavy, depending on how much restriction, how much tradition they contained.

Jesus calls not just one person, but all who are gathered to hear him to take up his yoke, to follow his Way, which he describes as “easy and lightly burdened.” For most of those listening, the common folk of the occupied province of Palestine, their lives were filled with heavy requirements and burdens. It would be exciting to cast off one’s life and follow Jesus – to know that it was a special, light yoke to follow, rather than the difficult one of a life of oppression. It would also be a relief to set aside the heavy loads, and take rest in Jesus.

Of course, to go back to the whirlpool metaphor, this yoke is a lashing to Jesus, a way of grace that doesn’t burden us, but saves us from spiraling deeper down. And all through Jesus’ yoke, which is summarized as “Love God. Love your neighbor. Love yourself.” Of course, while the yoke is easy and light, we still are human, and find ourselves chasing after wrong, just as Paul proclaimed. But Jesus is our rock and redeemer, the sure foundation, the savior who pulls us out again and again, through his good grace.

I started this sermon by talking about the first person to say, “My country, right or wrong” – but there was another who used this expression in a way I think we need to hear. Carl Schurz, an immigrant to the USA from the Germanies, had fought against the Prussian Empire as a youth. He settled in Wisconsin, and challenged the incumbent senator in an election race. When he ran for election, no German-born Americans had ever held a senate seat. In one of the election debates, Schurz exclaimed, “The senator from Wisconsin cannot frighten me by exclaiming, “My Country, right or wrong!” In one sense, I say so too. My country; and my country is the great American Republic. My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right.”

This, then, is our hope. For ourselves, we take up Christ’s yoke of love of God, neighbor, and self, asking the Spirit to keep us to the Way, and correcting us,

nudging us out of the whirlpool's path whenever we turn our heads. We pray, too, for our nation and the world – that whenever we are in the right, to be kept there – and if wrong, to be set right again.

May you find rest from your burdens in God's good grace, yoked together for the good of all. May Christ's burden of love rest easy on your heart, and may the Holy Spirit fill your sails with the breath of life, and guide you past the whirlpools of Sin. Amen.

### Works Cited

Fuller, Thomas. *The Holy State & The Profane State*. 1642.