

Real Freedom
(Matthew 11:16-19; 25-30)

Have you ever done this? You tune into Netflix, looking for a movie. What kind of movie? You don't have any idea... but you're sure you'll know it when you see it.

How about this?

Nah, I'm not in the mood for ***that***.

What about that one?

I'm not feeling it. Well, what do you want?

I don't know.

And you look ... and look... and look. Nothing. So, you wind up watching *Elf* for the 846th time.

Or, you're looking for something on the TV. Armed for battle, you wield the remote like a Jedi lightsaber. Click. Click. Click.

Nothing. You're in a daze. Your eyes focus long enough to see that you've been entranced for God knows how long, watching your 14th episode of *Gunsmoke*.

And you think to yourself, "Surely there must be ***something*** on *TV Land*." Because you just can't bear the thought of one more episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond*. Nothing.

It happens with kids all the time. "Dad, I'm hungry."

"What do you want?"

"I don't know. What do we got?"

"I could fix some hot dogs."

"Nah."

"There's some leftover lasagna I could heat up."

"I don't like lasagna."

"I could fix you some eggs and toast."

"That doesn't sound good."

"Well, what sounds good?"

"I don't know. What've we got?"

That's when I'd channel my mother and say, "Well, obviously you're not **that** hungry. Go outside and play."

According to the French Existentialists of the mid twentieth-century, existential paralysis is what we're left with in a modern world that knows unlimited freedom. If your choice of ice cream is chocolate or vanilla, you can make a decision almost by reflex. No struggle to decide.

If, however, you have to choose between 100 flavors in case after case in the frozen food section, things get immeasurably more difficult, don't they?

Paradoxically, unlimited freedom can make us **less** free, shackling us to an endless set of choices.

Humans are odd creatures; we **want** choices... but we find choice endlessly vexing. Most of that, I think, has to do with the fact that we often don't know **what** we want, so all choices wind up looking equally valid.

You think I'm being overly dramatic? Try this experiment: Wait until you're really hungry, then go to Kroger without a list. If you don't know what you want, everything looks good, or, alternatively, **nothing** looks good.

This is the problem Jesus faces in our Gospel. In chapter 10, a little before our passage for this morning, you may recall that Jesus has been instructing his disciples about the inhospitable treatment they're likely to receive when he sends them out to tell the world that "the kingdom has come near."

It's going to be tough, he says. "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of them, for they will hand you over to councils and flog you in their synagogues; and you will be dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles."

(Let me pause to point out that Jesus wasn't particularly effective at the whole "Ted-Lasso-pre-game locker room speech" thing. There wasn't a whole lot of wall pounding and high-fiving after this little pep talk... especially given what happens next.)

Jesus, on the heels of his instruction, receives a delegation from John the Baptist. And if Jesus's disciples haven't gotten the point Jesus has been trying to make for the past chapter, they're reminded about the seriousness of this whole enterprise when they realize that John's crew of followers

have come straight from John's new accommodations in Herod's dungeons to speak with Jesus.

In other words, Jesus's disciples—who've just heard Jesus's little cautionary heart-to-heart about how things are going to be tough for those who faithfully speak God's truth—they see the reality of Jesus's words when they meet up with a deputation sent by John the Baptist from cell block D.

After a little meeting with John's folks, Jesus turns to the crowd to extol John's virtue as a prophet. Prophets, though, as Jesus is quick to remind everybody, have historically met with more than a little opposition.

People willing to speak God's truth have, more often than not, found themselves on the south side of the popularity polls.

But then Jesus really gets to the heart of the matter: “To what will I compare this generation? It is like children who don’t know what they want. They say, ‘We want this; and when they get it, they say we **don’t** want this—we want **that**.’” John the Baptist came along, a fiery-eyed teetotaler—and you didn’t **want** that. Then, **I** came along, dragging the party wagon behind me, and you didn’t want **that**. You don’t want what’s in front of you, because you don’t know **what** you want.”

The fact is, they don’t even know what they’re **looking** at. Wisdom is sitting there right in front of them, and they can’t see it.

“Well, how’re we supposed to know wisdom?”

“Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.” That’s what Jesus says. In other words, if you want to know if I **am** who I **say** I am... stick around and watch how I live.

There's a long list of people still walking around saying that they're God's emissaries. Oh, they **talk** good. They know all the God lingo. They have their own television shows, run their own seminaries, sell tons of books, have churches that have their own weather systems, and big enough to need their own zip codes.

But always remember this: According to Jesus, Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

Have questions about the legitimacy of a prophet?

Follow 'em around for a couple of days. Put in your earplugs, and watch how they live.

One of my favorite stories is about an enthusiastic young man who found himself strolling along country roads one day, trying to fulfill his evangelistic duty. He came upon an

old Amish farmer. Not wanting to leave any stone unturned, he approached the old man and asked, "Are you saved?"

The Amish man tucked one thumb in the band of his pants and put the other to the corner of his mouth, obviously in deep concentration.

The young evangelist waited expectantly.

The farmer knitted his heavy brow for a moment, took out a piece of paper, and began to write.

So, now, of course, it was the enthusiastic young evangelist's turn to try to puzzle out what was going on.

When he finished writing, the old man handed the paper over.

"What's this?"

“A list.”

“But I just asked you a simple question: Are you saved?
What’s this list for?”

And the old farmer said, “It’s a list of five people who are my friends, and five people who are my enemies. If you want to know about the Lord and I, ask **them**.”

And with that, the old man turned around and walked away.

The good news of the reign of God isn’t ultimately something to be **understood, comprehended, puzzled out**—it’s something to be **lived**.

And living it is **difficult**. That’s what Jesus just spent a chapter trying to convince his disciples of. Remember?

“When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next...
Shake the dust off your sandals, and hit the road.”

And why are people going to have such a hard time hearing
what the disciples have to say?

Because the wise and intelligent of this world **can't** hear it.
The message of Jesus on the lips of his disciples as they
head out into the world, the thing people really want... is
real freedom.

It's the yoke that **frees**, instead of the yoke that
encumbers.

It's the burden that **liberates**, rather than the burden that
binds.

“Come unto me, all you who 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 of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

But as Warren Carter argues, the yoke in this case is the yoke of **nations**, **not** the yoke of observing Jewish law, as has often been argued. While it’s true that Torah is sometimes referred to as a yoke, it’s always a yoke that God offers as a **gift**, not as a relentless affliction to be borne by God’s people.

On the other hand, the yoke is often associated with repressive regimes that oppress God’s people in the Hebrew Scriptures. This is the yoke of oppression from which God promises liberation.

Isaiah says, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you

have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of the burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken on the day of Midian" (9:2-4).

The yoke, in this alternative sense, was understood to be the tool of the powers and principalities that ***maintained*** dominance at the expense of the powerless. The burden was understood to be the reality of laboring in a system that thought nothing of stealing from the poor so the wealthy could stay on top.

A system that had no use for the truth of God's prophets—the truth that God helps the helpless against the oppressors.

The yoke is an imperial instrument of domination, and is imposed on people who are in no position to resist—systems

that say, "We need to get our spending in order. Let's start at the bottom of the food chain and take from those who can least afford it, because they don't have a voice loud enough to oppose us. Then we'll work our way up the chain.

"We need to ensure that we control the yoke. Let's make laws disadvantaging those whose voices are too weak to cause real trouble: the aged, the immigrant, the addicted, those whose sexual orientation or gender identity doesn't meet with our approval. What good is a yoke of power, after all, if you don't use it to build and hang onto your own power?"

And the reality of it is (as Jesus points out), under the yoke of the nations, those who dare to speak God's truth are just as likely to find themselves at the pointy end of the imperial stick.

Rome was just such an imperial power, and that's the yoke under which Matthew's readers labor. **They** know what it's like to feel the yoke of Caesar's burden, the bar across their shoulders.

They understand what it feels like to be heavily laden, to walk in fear, to go to sleep at night knowing they live under a system designed to keep them at the bottom, always looking up.

So when Jesus said, "I've got a realm over which **I** reign, too," ears perked up.

He says, "But the yoke **I'll** lay across your shoulders, the burden **I'll** set upon your backs isn't one designed to keep you down; it's there to free you up to be who God created you to be. This **burden** of mine... is **true** liberation.

“But don’t kid yourselves. Taking up the yoke **I** offer—while it may ultimately be good—is going to set you against the yokes placed on people by lesser gods—by gods who’ll seek to assert their authority with murderous intensity.”

For people who don’t know what they **really** want, who don’t know **real** freedom, everything and nothing looks good. “We played the flute for you, and did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.”

But if you’ve been living at the bottom of the pile, living with the pain of being last in line, of always feeling like your life is lived at the mercy of a system designed to keep itself in power and to keep **you** helpless; if you’ve been told that the life you live, the love you bear for another human being isn’t real life, isn’t real love... then I’ve got good news for you.

Jesus offers **true** emancipation, not the endless multiplication of choices, but the liberation of being entrusted with a **purpose**, of being yoked with a people

whose vocation consists of helping to bear one another's burdens.

Real freedom isn't having **no** yoke, **no** burden, **no** purpose.

It's not freedom from responsibility to anyone but **ourselves**.

Real freedom is having a yoke designed to free you up to be who God created you to be, to give you the kind of labor that gives your life meaning and purpose.

I don't know about you, but that sounds like good news to me.

-Amen.