

Save the Cheerleader, Save the World

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By Harold Farris

On this weekend of a holiday and great celebration throughout the United States, I hope that each of you has taken a few moments to pause and consider the meaning of independence, the meaning of rights and responsibilities and the meaning of your relationship to God.

When I volunteered to preach this Sunday, I did so only because I expected the attendance to be low and thus I could relax and enjoy my first time in the pulpit. When I learned that the recommended theme for this week was Sacred Rest, I was sure that was a “sign” so I decided to take on something easy – saving the world! OK, we won’t actually take on saving the world, but I will talk about some personal thoughts on how we might all be challenged to consider listening more, loving more and seeking grace more in the development of a personal relationship with God. Sometimes we have to find the deep inner strength to persevere, which is where the cheerleader and saving the world comes in.

Have you ever had to cheer on or cheer up those that you love dearly, and you just really weren’t in the mood? I know that I have had many occasions when I’ve allowed self-pity and personal loathing to separate me from the positive attitude I should have for just being blessed with life. Cheerleaders have to have that “spunk”, that is sometimes a bit overdone, but they need to have it regardless of their own feelings (cheerleading is on the ESPN list of most difficult sports). Perhaps we need the ability to find strength beyond our own individual capability; I often find it in the twinkle of my wife’s eyes, or the squeeze from her hand. Perchance, all we need to do is put some of our faith to work, and Sacred Rest will come because we can be confident that we need not fear. We learn to forget as we grow up that **when God smiles at us God is letting us relax and smile back.**

In the verses immediately preceding those we read today, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has rebuked cities for turning away. He has spoken to the disciples of John the Baptist, and he has told of the treatment and rejection that they have both been subjected to; in his words and from the context we can presume it is not the most positive of times for Jesus. So he stops to thank the Father, to Pray. He is finding strength in God and affirming His relationship to the father in Matthew 11:25. Connecting the changing of the human heart and the changing of the world to the Love of the Father. Wasn’t it so easy when you were only a baby? You only had a few base needs and you loved and trusted so easily.

Can people “hear and see” the good news in the way we live as much as in the words we say? And what of the way we raise our children? Historically, from what I have read, John the Baptist was not a man who was given to following the crowd, and he was condemned for being possessed of demons. And it was Jesus who did the absolutely unthinkable – he ate and drank with the “unclean.” This was a man who just “had no shame.” It was despicable. Can you imagine anyone doing that; what would the neighbors think of such a drunk? If that “drunkard,” Jesus, came to your door would you open it? I believe that God’s plan, as a teaching God, is for us to lead, that others might follow. Hopefully they are following unconditional love.

Are we the generation that is being referred to in these verses? I know that I often speak pretty poorly of my own generation. We’re handing off some great and wonderful things to the “new” generation – a polluted Earth, the threat of nuclear destruction, and on and on. Were we the generation that rejected John and Jesus and said we have our own agenda? Did we solve the issue of racial segregation, immigration acceptance, peace, love? No. But we did create the internet. OK, maybe not so much.

Is it easy in the world today to build a strong and healthy theological basis for a relationship with God? Have you been to Barnes and Noble lately? There are more books in the religion section than I will have the opportunity to read in a lifetime. It isn't easy for the youth of the "next" generation. When they take a cheerleader and give her indestructible powers that she attempts to use for hurting people but she is able to learn to discern good and evil, perhaps they are developing their own healthy relationship with God. I believe they will find a way to save the world. Jesus said, "**Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God.**" Or as Jack Nicholson summed it up in *Easy Rider* for an earlier generation, "**Don't ever tell anyone that they're not free because then they're going to get busy killing and maiming to prove that they are.**"

As I get older I try very hard not to be cynical. I'm sure my children wouldn't always agree with that. Nonetheless, much of the inspiration for the things I express today came from them. When my older son started at TCU, I very off handedly told him that he should get an education and make a lot of money or change the world. You can imagine my amazement, pride and joy when he came home one weekend and said, "Dad did you mean what you said? I'm being called to go to seminary." Our youngest son is also very bright and willing to question. We have encouraged him to question and challenge and to accept the responsibility of creating his own relationship with God. His faith is stronger because of that. They really have been great kids, and when I open my mind I can learn so much from them.

The 11th chapter of Matthew can open our minds to pretty broad areas of thought. Certainly, I think, the Parable of the Children can mean so much to each of us by showing us how to find the openness and unconditional love they show. Philip Gulley says, "Grace is the unfailing commitment to love all persons regardless of their beliefs." A commitment to love all persons is certainly an ultimate goal that we probably can't reach, but you know young children will try even if they know they can't "win." They are not stressed and they are often excited and energetic.

Matthew 11:30, closes with "**For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.**" Everyone wears the yoke for something or someone; be sure that what you give your heart to is worthy. Appropriately enough on this 4th of July weekend compared to the difficulty of fulfilling the demands of many laws and rules, this "work" of Jesus is more like "freedom and independence".

Let me close with three brief thoughts. First, I believe in our sanctity as human beings. God recognizes all of us, and the yoke is as easy for us as for the disciples, as we read in Acts 15 today. Once we are secure in the love of God we are freed to rest and to be independent. Second, a quote from Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, "**If we could raise one generation with unconditional love, there would be no Hitlers. We need to teach the next generation of children from Day One that they are responsible for their lives. Mankind's greatest gift, also its greatest curse, is that we have free choice. We can make our choices built from love or from fear.**" And finally, the last responsorial words you'll say today are "We leave to serve the world." Let's cheer up and cheer for everyone we meet so that we really can fulfill this commission.

Amen