

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, July 05, 2026

The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Eucharist to Celebrate the
Semiquincentennial of the United States of
America
11:00 am**

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A Sermon by
The Rt. Rev. Ann Ritonia

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Come unto me

It is a privilege to be with you today. My name is Ann Ritonia, and I serve as Bishop of the Armed Forces and Federal Ministries for the Episcopal Church, a ministry that carries the Church's pastoral care and sacramental life to military personnel and their families, veterans, chaplains, federal employees, and many whose public service is demanding and often unseen.

This work is personal for me. Before this ministry, I served for 17 years in the United States Marine Corps. I know something of the discipline, sacrifice, burden, and bonds that come with service. And I know that those who appear strong on the outside can still carry deep weariness within. That is why Jesus' invitation today speaks so powerfully: "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

This weekend's celebrations—Fleet Week, fireworks, the Navy and Coast Guard's presence, and the 250th anniversary of our nation's independence invite us to reflect on freedom: the freedom we honor as citizens, and the deeper freedom Christ offers to the soul.

For two and a half centuries, this nation has told the story of freedom, freedom declared, defended, expanded, and still unfolding. It is right to celebrate with gratitude, especially among those who have served and sacrificed for this country. It is also faithful to speak honestly: the promises of freedom have not been experienced equally by all, and fear, inequality, and injustice still burden our common life. Our celebration, then, becomes more than memory; it becomes a commitment to help this democracy bear better fruit in the years ahead.

Into this honest mixture of gratitude and longing, celebration and unfinished hope, Jesus speaks:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

This is the promise of freedom but not the kind the world expects. For followers of Jesus, freedom does not begin with earthly citizenship. Our first belonging is in the kingdom of God, and every other loyalty is shaped, judged, and redeemed by that deeper allegiance.

So as flags fly and fireworks fade, the gospel asks us: What kind of freedom are we seeking, and whose kingdom is forming our lives?

That question came into focus for me recently, not in a committee meeting or a webinar, but on a dance floor at a wedding.

Last weekend I presided at a wedding in New Jersey. It was beautiful: the bride and groom beaming, the food overflowing, and the dance floor full. Then I noticed one husband sitting firmly at his table while his wife stood beside him, hand extended, inviting him to dance.

She tried everything: slow songs, fast songs, playful coaxing. She smiled, laughed, and tugged gently at his hand. But he would not move. Finally, she stepped away and found a little girl who was more than happy to join her. And there he sat, watching from the edge of the room, missing the joy offered to him.

And I thought of Jesus' words: "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." Jesus is describing a generation that refuses the invitation no matter how it comes. John comes with discipline; he is rejected. Jesus comes with joy; he is rejected. The problem is not the music. The problem is the refusal to dance.

We do the same whenever we stay on the edge of the life God offers, calling it caution, independence, or even freedom, when what we are really clinging to is control.

Somewhere along the way, many of us learned to mistake control for freedom. We want the music on our terms, the timing on our terms, even God on our terms. And when control becomes our version of freedom, we begin to confuse getting our way with the common good. We may call it leadership, conviction, or strength, but when power is used to force, silence, dominate, or bend others to our will, freedom has become another burden.

That kind of freedom does not bring peace. It brings fear, resentment, and frustration. The more tightly we try to control life, people, or outcomes, the heavier we become. Control promises relief, but it leaves us like children in the marketplace, finding fault with everything and satisfaction in nothing.

Jesus names the truth we already know: "You that are weary and carrying heavy burdens." Those burdens are real: expectations we cannot meet, pressure to succeed and prove ourselves, guilt we carry, grief we cannot resolve, and a world that demands more, faster, better, always.

Even faith can become a burden when it becomes performance instead of relationship. We live as though we cannot stop because everything depends on us. So we keep striving, producing, proving, and carrying more than we were ever meant to bear.

But Jesus does not say, "Fix yourself." He does not say, "Work harder." He does not say, "Earn it." He says, "Come to me." Freedom in Christ is not a system to master; it is a relationship to receive.

- It is the freedom to stop pretending we are fine and bring our weariness honestly to
- It is the freedom to ask for forgiveness and to forgive, instead of being chained to
- It is the freedom to rest without believing our worth depends on our
- It is the freedom to say no to what destroys life and yes to what deepens

This freedom is often hidden from the self-sufficient and revealed to those who come open-handed, like children. Like that little girl at the wedding, who did not analyze the invitation; she simply took the hand and joined the dance.

Then Jesus says something surprising: “Take my yoke upon you.” A yoke does not sound like freedom. But not all yokes are the same.

The world places on us a yoke of striving, comparison, outrage, and endless demand. It promises freedom but delivers exhaustion. Christ offers a different yoke: a shared yoke, because he carries it with us; a gracious yoke, because it is not driven by fear; a life-giving yoke, because it aligns us with love.

I have seen this kind of freedom in military and veteran communities. Many who have worn the uniform are trained to endure, to press through, to complete the mission, and not to become a burden to anyone else. Those instincts can be honorable and even necessary in service. But over time, they can also become a heavy yoke: the belief that I must carry my grief alone, manage my memories alone, protect my family from my pain, and never ask for help.

Our military and VA chaplains know this sacred ground well. They offer space, care, and steady presence where freedom can begin—often quietly, when someone finally says to a chaplain, a counselor, a spouse, a friend, or to God: “I am tired. I cannot carry this by myself anymore.” That is not failure. That is grace. That is the beginning of Christ’s lighter yoke.

Freedom, then, is not the absence of every obligation. Freedom is being bound to the One who gives life. It is learning to follow Christ in ordinary ways: telling the truth when silence would be easier, choosing mercy when anger feels justified, asking for help when pride wants to hide, pausing to pray before reacting, and trusting that we do not have to control everything for God to be faithful.

And this is the promise: “You will find rest for your souls.” Not just relief, but deep rest: the rest of not having to prove ourselves, the rest of not carrying everything alone, the rest of being held in grace.

Even when we hesitate, even when we stand at the edge of the dance floor, Christ does not withdraw the invitation. He comes toward us: hand extended, patient, ready to lead.

So on this weekend after the nation’s 250th birthday, we give thanks for civic freedom and for all who have labored, suffered, and sacrificed for it. But as Christians, we also remember that even the best earthly freedom cannot finally rest the soul. Our first citizenship is in the kingdom of God, and Christ alone teaches us how to live free.

The world says: carry it yourself. Jesus says: come to me. The world says: stay in control. Jesus says: trust me. The world piles on burdens. Jesus lifts them.

And so the invitation remains: step onto the dance floor, take his hand, and let him lead. Because in Christ, you are not losing your freedom. You are finally learning how to dance.