

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Anchorage, Alaska.
Message from Rev. Israel Portilla-Gómez, Associate Rector. July 05, 2026
Scripture readings: Zechariah 9:9-12, Psalm 145:8-15, Romans 7:15-25a,
Gospel: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. (Psalm 19:14)

On Friday, July 5, 1776, a worried Senior Warden ran into the Rector's office. "Father! The Declaration is signed! We are no longer British!"

The Rector looked up from his desk in a panic. "Good heavens! Does this mean we have to stop drinking tea and start serving coffee at the parish social hour?"

The Senior Warden nodded gravely. "I'm afraid so, Father. The Coffee Hour is a matter of national patriotism now."

Yesterday marked the 250th anniversary of the United States' independence. Although the Declaration of Independence focuses on earthly and political freedom, we also find core values in the Gospel, as it states: "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

Of the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, most were Christians of various denominations. For example, 34 were Anglicans who later became Episcopalians¹. Although there was one Presbyterian minister among them, the signers were clear about the separation of church and state. The idea that a human government could take on the role of God is outrageous. Such mixing and confusion must be avoided, because the kingdom of God extends beyond any political or social organization—even as it is imperative for us, as Christians, to live out the values of the Gospel. In this regard, last week, Rev. Michael stated in his sermon that Christian nationalism is almost the polar opposite of the entire spirituality of Jesus of Nazareth.

The first reading reveals a distinction between two strands of messianic ideology: the first is of a human nature—triumphalist, nationalist, and militaristic—while the other is more sovereign, centered on the expectation of a humble Messiah. This explains the contrast between the warhorse and the donkey. For Zechariah, the Messiah's power is defined not by armies or warriors, but by the capacity to bring us peace. That is the Messiah who became a reality in the person of Jesus. He is the King of Peace, and he wants to share his peace with us. "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."

Who among us is weary and carrying heavy burdens? Who among us needs rest for our souls? What can we learn from Jesus? Jesus changed the paradigm of religious practice. Many people thought he would provide a magic solution formula or more rules. Let us remember that there were 613 commandments of what to do and not to do. But Jesus did not talk about rules of conduct; he did not focus on criticizing immorality, and he did

¹ "Historical Society of the Episcopal Church - Anglican Signers the U.S. Declaration of Independence." 2025. Hsec.us. 2025. <https://hsec.us/List-Declaration-of-Independence>.

not talk about the importance of religious knowledge. He shocked many because he hung out with sinners, people who were looked down on by the religious leaders of the time.

Those whom Jesus spoke to were hungry and thirsty for God, his redemption, and love. Jesus knew their burdens and invited them to be relieved of them. He was fully aware of the social circumstances of the time and the political authoritarianism. He himself lived under it, but “Jesus detected a misery deeper than the sociopolitical one, the misery within human beings, which was the source of all the other human miseries and injustices.”² That misery can be described as the lack of love and all its negative consequences.

When we have love, we have compassion and concern for others' pain; we are grateful and contemplate life with pleasure; we forgive and ask for forgiveness when we make mistakes; and we are slow to judge and condemn others.

When Jesus says, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,” we are invited to learn the art of loving. It sounds simple, but it could be the hardest thing to live out. Saint Augustine of Hippo famously stated, “Love, and do what you will.” It sounds permissive, but when we truly love, all our decision-making is directed toward goodness. That is why we Episcopalians are sometimes criticized for not being a religious group that tells you everything you have to do. We simply want to follow the message of love that Jesus taught us, in which love exists only in freedom and truth, and that combination undoubtedly leads us toward good. Therefore, we should be suspicious of movements with high levels of religious control, where, through domineering methods justified as coming from God, they regulate the behavior, thoughts, and emotions of their members.

Following Jesus implies commitment, constancy, and effort, because that is how love flourishes. However, it happens in a healthy emotional environment, with a gentle Jesus, where we are invited to offer our best selves, of our own free will, to follow him. Even when things are difficult, life is easier and lighter with love. Imagine how heavy the burden is of living a life without love and meaning. Therefore, what Jesus tells us entirely makes sense: “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Amen.



Jesus Sits by the Seashore and Preaches by James Tissot, 1886-1896. Brooklyn Museum.

² Augusto Cury, *The Master: The Master of Masters analyzes and reveals that Jesus Christ possessed the most elevated intelligence* (Kindle ed.) [Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2014], chap. 4.