

Anxious moments: Matthew 11:16-19, 35-30; Romans 7:15-25a

For a Christian, freedom means being the one whom God intends us to be.

by [Verity A. Jones](#) in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

Most years, Americans celebrate the Fourth of July with hot dogs and homemade ice cream. Most years, we mention justice, liberty and the pursuit of happiness when the fireworks paint red, white and blue across the evening sky and the ice cream is finally ready to eat. But since the events of 2001, American Independence Day observances have a decidedly different tone. This year at our cookouts, “The Star Spangled Banner” won’t be served up with dessert as an afterthought, but offered as the main course.

A few years ago, William H. Willimon questioned the quality of this freedom. He predicted that “our age shall be known, not as the age of freedom, but as the age of anxiety. We are anxious about many things: having enough money, having good enough health, being secure and safe.” Indeed, the economic downturn of the last few years has my home state of Indiana in a frenzy as the government slashes state programs. As the baby boomers age, the whole country seems worried about how their declining health will affect their successors. We struggle to make sense of the “terrorism alert” warnings, wondering what our reaction should be and how or if we should live differently. As a result of all this anxiety, we’ve accepted tighter security measures at airports and public buildings, despite the potential infringement on personal rights.

Yet, like Paul in Romans 7, we may feel “anything but free.” “I can decide what I want to do, but I am powerless to do it,” he says. Sometimes I feel like Paul. Although I may carefully deliberate about what I ought to do or how I ought to act in a certain situation, my decision may finally have little to do with how I behave. Non-Arabic Americans this year confessed in the media that they take precautions around someone who appears Arabic or Islamic, despite their own opposition to racial profiling. We also experience this contradiction between desire and action in our broader culture. The U.S. Constitution says that everyone has the right to life,

liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but we have been unable to eradicate poverty, bigotry and violence, things that radically hinder life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Table fellowship is at the center of the controversy in the reading from Matthew 11. The keepers of the laws, those who govern what one eats, with whom one eats and when one eats, have declared that Jesus and John the Baptist are in violation of the law. John is chastised for not eating with anyone. They say he must have a demon. Jesus is criticized for eating with everyone. They call him a glutton and a drunk.

Today we may no longer have laws governing our table fellowship, but our social and cultural expectations about food can be just as burdensome. For many people, holiday meals do not conjure up images of happy backyard cookouts, but rather a never-ending internal struggle about what to eat, when to eat and with whom to eat. American society is obsessed with food and body image, and the two are usually in battle. Many of us create our own laws around eating as we struggle to control our own consumption. Our young women are prone to anorexia, even as our newsmagazines announce the phenomenon of a wealthy culture with more and more children who are overweight and underexercised.

We may have constitutional freedom in America, but many of our personal, social, cultural and even religious customs and practices severely limit any experience of “true freedom.” Why is this? We Christians look to the claim at the heart of the Christian gospel, where we are reminded that it is only when our lives are given over to Christ that we are truly free. Freedom does not mean being free to do whatever we want to do. Freedom for a Christian means being the one whom God intends us to be. Before that, our lives will be tossed about by other forces or desires that hinder us from being the children of God we are. It is a blessing when we finally leave those forces, those desires behind, and find our lives caught up in the life of God. When we trust God, when we accept the gift of mercy and love that God gives us in Christ, we become free to be who God created us to be in the first place. That is true freedom. Not a burden but a blessing, a grace and a liberation that can empower us to change the world for the common good.

Chapter 11 of Matthew’s Gospel concludes with words that are often used as an invitation to the Lord’s Supper. “Come to 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 in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my

yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

In Christ, God graces us with forgiveness when we cannot do the good that we want to do, with rest when we cannot bear the burden, with freedom to be who we are created to be. What is anxiety when we truly know this freedom? What is burdensome when we take on the yoke of Christ? The Lord’s Supper is no Fourth of July cookout. Within it we find true freedom. With this meal come not the expectations or laws of society. With it come life, revelation and grace.