Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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Remember Tom Sawyer? One of Tom's most famous cons sprang from his transformation of a punishment into a successful enterprise. His Aunt Polly sentenced him to whitewash her long, high fence. On a Saturday! While friends swam and horsed around together!

Never lacking creativity, Tom pulled off the trick of making the job look like an exclusive occupation. He approached the fence as his canvas for a great work of art. He made it seem so attractive that his buddies actually paid him to have their turn. His earnings included an apple, a decent kite and even a dead rat on a string.

Mark Twain tells us that the adventure taught Tom "that in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain. ... Work consists of whatever a body is *obliged* to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do." Tom Sawyer, imp that he was, would have understood a lot of today's Gospel — primarily because he would have listened to it without pious pretensions.

## Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 5, 2026

Zechariah 9:9-10
Psalm 145
Romans 8:9, 11-13
Matthew 11:25-30

In today's Gospel, Matthew knits together three apparently disparate ideas, as if Jesus were thinking out loud. First, Jesus praises God for the simple people who have accepted the grace that seemed beyond the grasp of sophisticated people. Next, he thanks the Father for the intimate relationship and mission they share. Finally, he invites disciples to accept his yoke.

Why does revelation elude the sophisticated and make sense to the simple? The story of the rich young man illustrates the answer. In Matthew 19:13-24, just after Jesus had enjoyed the company of children, this fellow approached and asked what he must do in addition to following the Law to gain eternal life. Jesus invited him to leave his wealth to the poor and join with him. That would mean trusting completely

in Jesus and his mission. The man had too much faith in other things to risk his all.

Our sophistication can be like that guy's wealth: We can know too much to give our all to a simple, yet costly mission.

Jesus follows his prayer of praise with a miniature discourse about his union with God. He says he has received everything from the Father, that they are intimately united and that Jesus chooses to reveal the Father to the world. In 38 words, Matthew's Jesus explained himself and his mission.

Then Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." One interpretation of this suggests that the burdensome yoke the people bore was the complicated law that could be used to designate simple people as unclean or unworthy in the sight of God. Strict interpreters of the law could strive to be perfect — a futile effort that comes from the will more than the heart.

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Taking on Jesus' yoke is an entirely voluntary activity that involves the heart of the disciples who enjoy or are open to an intimate encounter with Jesus Christ. They get caught up in Jesus' love for God and the world. They've caught fire with his vision and mission.

Because of that, they'll give their lives, not just their stuff. They choose to bind themselves together with Christ, sharing his burden, working shoulder to shoulder, walking in tandem, under the guidance of the one Jesus calls Father.

On this Fourth of July weekend, we can imagine that Mark Twain, who had little respect for organized religion, would agree with Jesus that life isn't given to be a burden. He would also like the fact that while Jesus would hardly reject those who do good from a sense of obligation, he would wish for much more for them.

That more comes from really knowing Christ. Last year, Pope Leo told the world's youth that if you want to encounter the risen Lord, "Listen to his word ... Seek justice, renewing your way of life, to build a more humane world. Serve the poor ... Remain united with Jesus in the Eucharist."  This is what makes the Christian mission a joy, play rather than difficult work.

Tom Sawyer made his task such an attractive work of art that his buddies paid for a chance to join in. That's what Christ seems to be offering us today.

Can we cultivate the joy of knowing Christ in word, sacrament, our fellow Christians and all creation? Can we do it with such gusto that others will get curious and want to do what we so love doing?

This is not the transformation of punishment; it's the transformation of our world.