

Independence Day 2021

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A more Perfect Union

Years ago I gave my husband a book for Christmas: How the Irish Saved Civilization, by Thomas Cahill. My husband had two Irish grandparents, one on each side, but he insisted that he was English through and through, and not just English but a proud Yorkshireman. I gave him the book to push back against his teasing, myself being Irish, that the Irish were somehow less than the English. He was surprised to find that the title wasn't a joke – the Irish monks did, in fact, preserve literacy during the Dark Ages, so you could say they saved civilization.

If you've ever made the mistake of assuming I was English, you know that I am quick to correct you – Irish and British but never English! When one of my sons was starting to learn percentages in math class he proclaimed proudly that he was 50% English, 50% Irish, and 50% American.

Patriotism is a strange phenomenon. We identify ourselves with a particular patch of soil, and it becomes important to defend the decisions made on that patch, to uphold the culture and customs of that patch, sometimes even to deny others the right to claim the same identity or to share that patch. The idea of nationhood is a relatively recent concept in human society, and the division of parts of the planet into distinct nations, usually directed by nation-based empires, has caused and continues to cause enormous conflict and suffering. You only have to think about Israel/Palestine, the Balkans, or Ireland, to get the picture.

Today of course is Independence Day, as well as Sunday. You may not know that Independence Day is designated a major feast in our Book of Common Prayer, along with Thanksgiving Day, and we have specially selected Scripture readings. Most of the time July 4 doesn't fall on a Sunday, so this year I wanted to give the Independence Day readings an airing. This is why you aren't hearing from the second book of Samuel or the Gospel according to Mark today, as you might expect, based on the Sunday lectionary.

It's not uncontroversial in Christian circles, to make a religious festival of a national observance. There is always the danger of falling into idolatry, of making this a day for jingoistic and xenophobic speeches. But it also presents us with an opportunity to reflect on the nature of patriotism, on the ideals that the founders of the nation expressed, and on the progress we have made – or failed to make – towards those ideals.

The Collect appointed for Independence Day is not the prayer you heard at the beginning of the service. That's because a national leader of the Episcopal Church recently published a note pointing out that the Collect appointed for Independence Day says, "the founders of this country won liberty for themselves and for us." While that is true for many people, it glosses over the fact that the founders did not share that liberty with every American citizen; and we know that it was many decades before all Americans would be accorded their liberty and full dignity as human beings and children of God.

The Collect we prayed today is more aspirational than self-congratulatory; and in this time of growing recognition of systemic racism and injustice, it seems appropriate to express our hope to achieve full justice and liberty, rather than to perpetuate a myth that has harmed many generations of Americans. It is possible to love your country and at the same time to acknowledge its imperfections. We do the same for our family members, and God does the same for us.

There is much to celebrate today, much to be proud of, when we consider the achievements of this nation. The US led the way in developing a democratic form of government; it resisted the perennial human longing for a monarch (just think about the stories we've been reading about Samuel and Saul); and it provided sanctuary for many, many people who sought the freedom to practice their faiths. The Scripture readings assigned for today call us, both to remember those achievements, and to keep striving to better them: to love the stranger in our welcome of immigrants seeking a better life; to honor those who seek to walk by faith, whatever that faith may be; and to live in peace with our neighbors of every color, class, creed, and identity.

This past year and a half, St. Paul's has been on a journey of self-education; together reflecting on the human cost of this nation's wealth and power. It has been very hard for some of us to learn of the injustice, abuse, and fear that are a part of the daily lives of many of our brothers and sisters. And, sadly, we are seeing stiff resistance in some parts of the country to the prospect of teaching our children about the less glorious aspects of American history.

I have lived in this country for over 35 years, and I chose to become an American citizen, but I confess that for most of that time I was ignorant of much of this country's history and oblivious to the depth of systemic injustice that Sacred Ground has recently revealed to me. One major aha moment for me happened in June, 2015. I was on a cross-country drive with my son from Virginia to San Diego and we spent the last night of the trip in Phoenix. As we filled up with gas for the final leg of the journey on the morning of June 26, Sam's phone alerted him that the Supreme Court had ruled in favor of marriage equality. As soon as we arrived home, I left my son to unpack his car and I headed over to the LGBT Center to join in the celebration. The joy and tears of the crowd were no surprise, but the aha moment for me was seeing many people carrying Stars and Stripes flags and hearing my friends speak about feeling, at last, like full citizens of the US. I was deeply moved by their sincere patriotism.

I believe that this educational journey we are all on is of God: that God is calling us as a community and as a nation to grow in our generosity of spirit to one another and to the rest of the world; that our call as followers of Jesus is to practice humility and willingness to listen and learn; to reach across longstanding divisions; to remember that our first allegiance is to the God who made all the nations and peoples of the earth, who "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" alike; and that our Savior, God's Son, lived as a man of color in an oppressed community and suffered an unjust death at the hands of powerful men who could not tolerate the possibility of repentance and change.

Today we celebrate freedom, won at great cost, and we affirm our continuing struggle to achieve a more perfect union under God. We acknowledge that freedom is still unequally distributed, and

that Christ set us free, not to do whatever we like in our own interest, but free to open our hearts, to share our abundance so that all may flourish, to live not for ourselves but for others. The Founders of this nation held varying degrees of Christian faith, but they shared certain ideals, and they sought to live up to those ideals within the cultural limitations of their time. They would have identified closely with Abraham's story as told in the letter to the Hebrews, desiring a better world, one that would reflect the Kingdom of Heaven. As followers of Jesus we too long for that world, and so we pray that God may give us a zeal for justice and the strength of forbearance, that we may use this precious freedom to God's glory and for the welfare of all people. Amen.