

4 Pentecost
The Sunday before Independence Day
July 3, 2022

In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.

What a week. Bombshell testimony about the January 6, 2021 insurrection. Repercussions of Supreme Court decisions ... overturning *Roe v. Wade* ... praying in schools ... using public funds for religious education ... easier to carry guns in public places. Then ... in Florida ... new laws taking effect on July 1 ... "Don't Say Gay" ... restrictions on teaching history, especially around racial issues ... and more. We are living in interesting times ... and they are becoming more interesting each day. Many of these actions have a religious overtone to them, yet they come from a government who's Constitution guarantees "freedom of religion."

Many in this country call the United States a Christian nation. In fact, this nation was founded on the principle that the government could not impose religion upon its citizens. We are a nation that allows us to be Christian. But it also allows us to be Jewish, and Islamic, and Hindu, and Buddhist ... and agnostic, and atheist, and pagan witches.

There's no such thing as "Christian" politics, and efforts by all political parties to co-opt Jesus badly distort his message. I don't know what this angry, chest-thumping, bullying, "don't tread on me" thing is that many in this country have come to call Christianity, but it isn't the Gospel of Jesus Christ that I know. I'm positive it isn't Good News for the poor and marginalized and the voiceless. It seems to me that it is a toxic cocktail of power, control, fear, nationalism, and White privilege – and it looks more like the bloated opulence of Rome than the early church that resisted it.

The Jesus of the Gospels proposes no political program, but something far more strenuous, something that historian Garry Wills calls "scary, dark and demanding." No state or political party, says Wills in his book *What Jesus Meant*, can indulge in the self-sacrifice that Jesus demands when he asks his followers to lovingly serve the least and the last wherever we find them.

The nation will observe its 246th birthday tomorrow on July 4. The signing of the Declaration of Independence was the defining moment in the history of this country. The founders of our nation were saying that just because we were colonies of England it did not make us any less worthy of justice and fairness. Those words are the guiding principal behind everything that was to follow: The Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the interpretation of them in the legislature and courts. In many ways those words function like a mission statement identifying the core values of the people of this nation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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.

However, the signers of the Declaration of Independence were all white Christian men. They were all Caucasian ... they were all Christians ... and they were all male. As a matter of fact, sixteen of them were Episcopalians. It was the culture of the day, and that culture of privilege was taken for granted by most people, especially those who were white Christian men.

So, if “all men are created equal” to whom did this equality apply? Just who was worthy of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?” Did that include literally everyone? Did it include slaves and the Native Americans who were called “Indians”? “All men are created equal.” Was this a generic use of “men” referring to all human beings, or was it specific to the male gender?

The issue of which “men” were created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights has not been an easy one for this country to figure out ... an issue that often led to violence. In the 21st Century we may take for granted that men and women of all races and colors are considered “equal” under the law, but that was not always the case ... and it is not always the case today. The consequences of systemic racism still have a profound effect upon the fabric of this nation.

We need only look at all the black men and women who have died violent deaths at the hands of an agency of our government meant to protect all citizens to know that “equal” under the law does not mean “justice for all.” The number of incarcerated black males is five times the number of incarcerated white males. Black women and men became infected, got sicker, and died of COVID19 at much higher rates than white people. At least one cause is the inequity in our healthcare system ... a consequence of systemic racism. As high as the ideal is, “All men are created equal,” it is still just an ideal ... not a reality for people of color in this nation.

In 1852 the abolitionist Frederick Douglass gave a speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth July?” It is not only a brilliant work of oratory, it speaks to our every frustration spurred by the gap between the ideals of the United States and the reality we witness every day ... the disparity between the Bill of Rights and our decaying civil liberties ... the difference between the words “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” and a nation that leads the world in jailing its own citizens ... the discrepancy between our highest ideals and our darkest realities.

As Douglass says: “Had I the ability, and could I reach the nation’s ear, I would today pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.”

Being a citizen has its rights. It also has its responsibilities. The founders of this country asserted that we are endowed with certain unalienable rights by our Creator. We, as a people of faith,

believe that. Our particular faith in this congregation is the Christian faith based upon the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. We believe that we are citizens of God's realm. We actually believe that all human life belongs to God's realm. Justice is one the rights of that citizenship, and sharing justice among all of God's citizens, present and yet to come, is our responsibility. And, we believe that justice embraces "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

On this Sunday before Independence Day I want to acknowledge and affirm the role of faith in the founding of this country. I also acknowledge the abuses of the Church as a tool of the oppressor ... especially around this nation's history of slavery and Jim Crow discrimination. If faith had a role at our country's founding it certainly has a role today. But then, who speaks for the people of faith? Most recently it appears that conservative evangelicals have co-opted Christianity for its own purposes ... but they are not the only voice out there.

John C. Danforth is a Republican who served for 18 years as a United States Senator from the state of Missouri, and also served as a United States Ambassador to the United Nations. John C. Danforth is also the Rev. John C. Danforth, an Episcopal priest. The Rev. John C. Danforth officiated at the funeral of President Ronald Reagan at the National Cathedral in June of 2004. A year later, in 2005, he wrote an Op-Ed article for the New York Times titled "Onward, Moderate Christian Soldiers." I have quoted from this piece in other July 4th sermons, yet I believe that his piece written 17 years ago is just as relevant today as it was then. The Rev. John C. Danforth wrote:

In recent years, conservative Christians have presented themselves as representing the one authentic Christian perspective on politics. With due respect for our conservative friends, equally devout Christians come to very different conclusions.

It is important for those of us who are sometimes called moderates to make the case that we, too, have strongly held Christian convictions, that we speak from the depths of our beliefs, and that our approach to politics is at least as faithful as that of those who are more conservative. Our difference concerns the extent to which government should, or even can, translate religious beliefs into the laws of the state.

People of faith have the right, and perhaps the obligation, to bring their values to bear in politics. Many conservative Christians approach politics with a certainty that they know God's truth, and that they can advance the kingdom of God through governmental action.

Moderate Christians are less certain about when and how our beliefs can be translated into statutory form, not because of a lack of faith in God but because of a healthy acknowledgement of the limitations of human beings. Like conservative Christians, we attend church, read the Bible and say our prayers.

But for us, the only absolute standard of behavior is the commandment to love our

neighbors as ourselves. Repeatedly in the Gospels, we find that the Love Commandment takes precedence when it conflicts with laws. We struggle to follow that commandment as we face the realities of everyday living, and we do not agree that our responsibility to live as Christians can be codified by legislators.

We think that efforts to haul references of God into the public square, into schools and courthouses, are far more apt to divide Americans than to advance faith.

For us, religion should be inclusive, and it should seek to bridge the differences that separate people. We do not exclude from worship those whose opinions differ from ours.

Following a Lord who sat at the table with tax collectors and sinners, we welcome to the Lord's table all who would come. Following a Lord who cited love of God and love of neighbor as encompassing all the commandments, we reject a political agenda that displaces that love.

(NY Times, June 17, 2005)

Again, this was written 17 years ago in 2005, but it seems to me to be just as relevant today as it was then.

Our holy scriptures speak of justice and compassion ... of hope for a better world for future generations ... and of calling us to extraordinary reconciliation. The founders of this nation spoke of justice for everyone; a hope for generations yet to come ... and extraordinary inclusion beyond the existing cultural norms. If "All men are created equal" means anything at all, it means the Black Lives Matter. If it means anything at all, it means that women have the same rights over their bodies that men have over theirs. If it means anything at all, it means the LGBTQ+ persons are to be included in all the rights guaranteed to all others in this nation.

On this Sunday before Independence Day we are reminded that this nation is filled with people who express their faith in many different ways ... our way ... as Christians at St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church ... takes seriously what Jesus took seriously.

Our faith ... even a moderate or progressive Christian faith ... has a role in the intersection of faith and government. Being a citizen has its rights. It also has its responsibilities. One of ours is not to be silenced by louder voices. It is important for those of us who are sometimes called moderates or progressives to make the case that we, too, have strongly held Christian convictions, that we speak from the depths of our beliefs, and that our approach to politics is at least as faithful as that of those who are more conservative.

I end with the alternative collect to be read on Independence Day ... the Collect for the Nation:

Lord God Almighty, you have made all the peoples of the earth for your glory, to serve you in freedom and in peace; Give to the people of our country a zeal for justice and the strength of forbearance, that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious

will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Amen.