



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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## Land of the Free, Home of the Brave?

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 5, 2020*

*The Fifth Sunday of Pentecost*

*Based on Zechariah 9:9-12; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30*

*Let us pray: Come, Holy Spirit and ignite in us your holy fire; strengthen your people with the gift of faith, revive your Church with the breath of love, and renew the face of the earth, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

This verse from our Gospel reading today resonates deeply on this July 4th weekend. These words of Jesus can be juxtaposed with another refrain from the Star-Spangled Banner in which lyrics champion America as "the land of the free and the home of the brave." Both scripture verse and anthem lyric speak of freedom: Jesus' promise of deliverance from carrying heavy burdens, and the anthem endorsing the freedom this country symbolizes.

But I invite you to listen to another expression of emancipation that knits together both scripture and anthem refrain. It arrives through the words of African American poet Langston Hughes in 1925, in his poem titled, "I, Too." Hughes writes:

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.  
Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

Independence Sunday, the Sunday during the July 4th weekend, represents a peculiar moment in the religious and historical reality of African Americans and people of color in the United States. As faith communities celebrate the founding of this nation, African American faith communities and other communities of color can never forget the tragic reality that since this nation's founding, America has suffered from the deep and abiding wound of slavery and institutionalized racism. This grave understanding serves as the primary reason African Americans, indigenous people, and other communities of color stand in uneasy tension regarding Independence Day, especially given the high-profile racial turmoil of the past few months.

For Black people in particular, on the one hand we join with social reformer and abolitionist Frederick Douglass when he prophetically questioned America on the flagrant inequalities toward black people in his 1852 speech "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?" Douglass declares:

"I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence bequeathed by your fathers is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought light and healing to you has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn."

But, on the other hand, poet and writer Langston Hughes captures the hope, perseverance and tenacity that African Americans also possess when he proclaims "I, too, am America."

Although we have made significant strides in this nation on issues of civil rights, there remains a dualistic reality in which African Americans and other communities of color in this country have lived and must continue to live.

We have witnessed the recent killing of George Floyd, and of late have heard of the not-so-recent killing of 23-year-old Elijah McClain that occurred last August in Colorado at the hands of law enforcement, and whose case is now receiving national scrutiny. Personally, I have had a family member tragically killed by police in a situation that did not warrant such violence, a case where the two officers involved were not charged with any malfeasance.

I have been followed with suspicion in department stores, have had racial epithets shouted at me through car windows, and have had police cruisers trail my vehicle for several miles for no reason but to invoke fear. I, as a Black woman in America, get ready for racism on a daily basis.

A recent report by the news outlet *Al Jazeera* asserts that the numerous acts of systemic state brutality and treatment of Black Americans support any claims of "well-founded fear" for their safety and wellbeing at home. The report states that due to the social and political unrest, if Black Americans were to seek asylum in another country for safety, they could very well be eligible. In the evaluation of countless refugee asylum cases, the oppression Black Americans face in the U.S. would qualify as the type of persecution that would serve as a legitimate basis for most asylum claims.

So, no, I cannot, in good faith or with integrity, sing lyrics about "the land of the free and the home of the brave" for those lyrics were not written for me.

Rather for people of color it has often been:

"the land of the followed and the home of the fearful;  
the land of the harassed and the home of the intimidated;  
the land of the suspected and the home of the disenfranchised."

Matthew Lopez, the playwright who was our guest at last Sunday's 10am forum said it bluntly: "America is sorely lacking in grace." Yes, we have squandered, misspent, misused, and misapplied the freedom for which our soldiers have so valiantly fought.

The United States is carrying a heavy burden. And, so, Jesus' refrain rings out even more loudly to me than ever before: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

The Hebrew word *mishpat*, which is commonly translated as “judgment” or “justice,” conveys a sense of making things right or putting them in their proper place. Dr. Cornel West, political activist, author, and professor, has said that, “Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private.” The failure of people to act publicly on issues of injustice, as if closing their eyes to the world, will impede transformative justice taking place within the soul.

American poet and activist Emma Lazarus, who wrote the sonnet “The New Colossus” which is inscribed upon the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, stated the following: “Until we are all free, we are none of us free.” An oppressive society dehumanizes everyone involved since, as Dr. Martin Luther King said, “We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” In his book *Jesus Means Freedom* German theologian Ernst Käsemann writes, “Our Creator...requires our unconditional love of our neighbor and our unqualified readiness to serve and forgive, because anything less means the ruin of every creature.”

The message is clear: “Where even one is oppressed, all are in chains.”

If people in this country remain behind the cloak of privilege and if there is no salient commitment to radical truth-telling and social change, we are all, in fact, not free on this 4th of July weekend. Neither you nor I will truly be free until we are all free. Until our baptismal vow to respect the dignity of every human being becomes the true fabric of our lives. Until, says Lilla Watson the indigenous Australian activist, until there is the literal realization that your liberation is bound up with mine. No one is free when others are being persecuted because we all belong to the same human collective. And that reality needs to drive us deeper into responsible action towards one another based solely on the fact that every last one of us shares our humanity in common, regardless of what has the potential to divide us.

Previously untold stories need to be told. Narratives from the voices of those who would normally not be listened to need to be finally heard. The entire story of America —not just the stories of some Americans—needs to be recognized. What must be remembered, valued and respected are the experiences of Americans whose stories have been stifled and driven underground for the sake of feigned unity and in the name of the evil of racism and institutionalized systemic oppression. Only when a full portrayal of stories from all who call this country home can be unearthed, openly acknowledged, upheld, revered, and honored can we begin to truly heal as American people.

Christians are called to bravely pursue justice and mercy. We find this biblical mandate in Mosaic Law in the Bible’s earliest books, in the audacious and intrepid prophets who challenged Israel’s failure to respond to the needs of the poor and marginalized, and in Jesus’ New Testament teachings and the apostolic letters. We, therefore, must take seriously Micah’s call “to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God,” and Isaiah’s command to “seek justice [and] correct oppression.” As Christians of all textures and colors, we cannot afford to ignore facing difficult truths in exchange for naïve solutions.

The church must awaken and rekindle its responsibility towards its divine call to be salt and light in this world. The Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas, dean of Episcopal Divinity School, writes that “if faith communities and institutions are to repair the breach between the unjust present and God’s just future...they must act as if that future is now...and be an active presence in the public square as sanctuary and witness.”

Today as a church, during this 4th of July weekend, not only do we celebrate the emergence of a nation, but we must consider what type of nation we want to be as we continue to evolve and mature. Recognizing that systemic injustice is woven into the very fabric of this country, how will we continue to sing the Lord’s songs as we journey through this strange land, and as we acknowledge that the humanity of each and every person is inextricably linked? For when we identify with others’ experiences, we often discover unexpected truths about ourselves that otherwise might not have ever been brought to light.

America is the country of my birth. America is the country that I love. And I love it too much to not take on the challenge to make it a place that is truly worthy of the powerful genius, brilliance and possibilities which lie within its sinews—in order to bring glory to God, for the love, freedom and hope of Jesus to be understood, and to secure dignity for all of its people.

As activist Ginna Green writes, “The United States is breaking—painfully, visibly—but not irreparably. The cracks have always been there for us to study. Perhaps, now, we can create the place that holds us all.”

Amen.

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