

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 9—Year A
Zechariah 9:9-12
Psalm 145:8-15
Romans 7:15-25a
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

The **Fourth of July** is *complicated*. I spent time yesterday reading the **Declaration of Independence** in its entirety. Its *soaring language* and *eloquence* is *unparalleled*: “***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***”—that **hunger** of people to **live fully** into who God has made them to be and the **deep desire** to be **recognized as equal**. The **Declaration of Independence** then goes on to recount “**the history of all the injuries and usurpations done by the King of Great Britain**” and the **complicity of the legislature in Britain**. The **desire to be free** runs deep in the **human soul**. There is such **beauty** and **power** in these words! This is, indeed, **at the heart of what the Fourth of July celebrates**.

I *also* spent time yesterday **watching a video of Frederick Douglass’ descendants**—**five of his great, great, great grandchildren ages 12-20**—reading excerpts of his **speech from 1852** entitled, “***What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?***” delivered before an **abolitionist group**. Douglass was an **escaped slave** who had become a prominent **activist, author, public speaker, and leader in the abolitionist movement**—in the Episcopal Church, we celebrate him in our **Calendar of Saints on February 20th**. This video prompted me to go hunt up this speech.

Douglass spends the **first part of his speech extolling** what the **founding fathers accomplished**. Listen to what he says: “***Fellow Citizens, I am not wanting in respect for the fathers of this republic. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men...They were statesmen, patriots and heroes, and for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory.***

They loved their country better than their own private interests; and, though this is not the highest form of human excellence, all will concede that it is a rare virtue, and that when it is exhibited, it ought to command respect. He who will, intelligently, lay down his life for his country, is a man whom it is not in human nature to despise. Your fathers staked their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor, on the cause of their country. In their admiration of liberty, they lost sight of all other interests.”

Douglass continues, “***They were peace men; but they preferred revolution to peaceful submission to bondage. They were quiet men; but they did not shrink from agitating against oppression. They showed forbearance; but that they knew its limits. They believed in order; but not in the order of tyranny. With them, nothing was “settled” that was not right. With them, justice, liberty and humanity were “final;” not slavery and oppression. You may well cherish the memory of such men. They were great in their day and generation.***” Wow. Powerful.

But Douglass doesn’t stop there. He goes on, and these were the words delivered by his **young descendants** in that video I came across yesterday: “***Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to 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 life 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...

Fellow-citizens; above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions!"

Later in that speech, Douglas comes in for a piercing critique of the church marking how the church gave “the sanction of religion and the Bible to the whole slave system.” He states: “*The American church is guilty, when viewed in connection with what it is doing to uphold slavery; but it is superlatively guilty when viewed in connection with its ability to abolish slavery. The sin of which it is guilty is one of omission as well as of commission. Albert Barnes but uttered what the common sense of every man at all observant of the actual state of the case will receive as truth, when he declared that ‘There is no power out of the church that could sustain slavery an hour, if it were not sustained in it.’*”

Ouch. Echoes of this show up in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* addressed to eight moderate white clergy leaders, including two Episcopal bishops of Alabama, and I tell you, as a priest who is white and moderate and who loves the church, *these kind of sentiments haunt me.*

So, Frederick Douglas can absolutely appreciate with incredible generosity what the founding fathers accomplished and what is good in our roots AND love this country and the church enough to call them to account for not living up to their high ideals. In the end, he says this: “*Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country...I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope.*”

As with the Declaration of Independence that is at the heart of the Fourth of July, as with our sacred Bible, as with ALL of our faith—the seeds of freedom and justice and transformation are sown there AND so are the seeds of injustice and oppression because, as Paul describes so well morning in Romans 7, we human beings can make a mess of things, even with the noblest of intents, *let alone the things we do when we are driven by our less-than-noble instincts.*

Is it hard to see what is good and true and beautiful and noble AND all the ways we fall short? Is it hard to live with a heart open to BOTH of these realities? *You bet.* It will ask everything of our hearts and minds and spirits to live with this kind of perspective and generosity and clear-eyed capacity to continually call us to our highest ideals.

And it will cost us dearly with those who would see *only one truth, one reality, without acknowledging the other.*

But as people of faith, we follow a Lord who only knew how to “stretch out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross” in both directions, holding it ALL in a love that refused to let go, “that everyone might come within the reach of [his] saving embrace.” [Collect from Morning Prayer II]

Can we heed the aspirations of the Declaration of Independence, acknowledge where our union has fallen short, take to heart the critique of Frederick Douglass that reverberates still, lean hard into our baptismal vows and the way of Jesus, and heal this land?

And when we grow weary, and *we will*, and when we stumble in this work, and *we will*, can we take to heart what Jesus tells us in Matthew 11 this morning, “Come to me, all you that 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.”

As followers of Jesus, our freedoms are *never absolute*, and our rights as individuals never exist *apart from the Body*, nor do they *reign supreme*. Our freedom is *always* yoked to Jesus; our freedom is *always* tethered to him and to those whom he loves, which encompasses *every* human being.

Where he goes, we go.

Yoked to him, we will find our way. With him, we will find the way to “break down the dividing wall and hostility between us” [Ephesians 2:14] and reconnect the whole. With him, we are free to dream a bigger dream. With him, we can hold fast to the fiercest kind of hope there is.

Take Jesus’ yoke upon you and learn from him. Find the rest for which your soul longs for, *AND THEN*, from that deep center, set out with courage and strength and power to form a more perfect union with God, with your neighbor, with your enemy, with your fellow citizens in *this* nation, with your fellow citizens in the kingdom of God that is *beyond all nations*, with all of creation *knowing* that, though this work will never be done, yoked to Jesus, the burden will be light. Amen.

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Resources:

[Declaration of Independence](#)

[Video of Frederick Douglass' Descendants Reading Excerpts from "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"](#)

[Full Text of Frederick Douglass' "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?"](#)