

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9)
July 4, 2021
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Ezekiel 2:1-5
Psalm 123
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13

Church building closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: the church is open at www.trinitybend.org.

Here in the U.S., today is Independence Day. But it can be a bit tricky.

Byron Rushing is an African American legislator from Massachusetts and a prominent lay leader in the Episcopal Church. He currently serves as Vice-President of the House of Deputies of the Episcopal Church. Every year, as the 4th of July approaches, he offers a word to the church, which reads in part:

Let me take this opportunity to remind Episcopalians in the United States that many of us do not consider the words – “the founders of this country won liberty for themselves and for us” – in the Independence Day collect to be accurate ...

Men with property *were* included, of course, but not slaves, as Byron Rushing reminds us. Nor women. Nor the people who lived on this continent before it was “discovered” by 15th century Europeans. (And white men with property still enjoy more freedoms than others.)

It seems to me that Independence Day is more aspirational than historical. Our nation’s story of freedom for all was an aspiration not fully available to everyone back at the start. And for all that has surely been advanced since, it’s an aspiration not fully realized even still.

That’s part of what’s tricky for us today. And it’s also a bit tricky because although we call today “Independence Day,” that’s only half the truth.

The 13 disparate colonies declared their independence from a foreign power, but from that moment they knew their only hope was to work together as “united” states (of America).

Benjamin Franklin is given credit for saying so. As he signed his name to the Declaration of Independence, he reminded those gathered to sign their names next to his:

We must all hang together or, most assuredly, we will all hang separately.

Which is to say that it has always been as much *Inter*-dependence Day as Independence Day.

And our faith says the same, that we were not made to live alone. The creation stories, from the first two chapters of Genesis, make the point right there at the start. In the first chapter, we read that God created us, male and female, in the image of God.

In the second chapter, we read how God formed the first human out of the mud of the earth, then declared: “It is not good that the earth-creature, the *adam*, should live alone ...” And then the two – helpmates each for the other – were placed in a garden, to tend and care for creation and to find safety and sustenance there.

That’s our biblical “origin story.” It tells us that our lives are inextricably woven together in a web that connects us with one another and with the whole of creation. We are all utterly interdependent. We could not survive without microbes that help build our soil and the plants and trees that create oxygen and offer us food; we would not grow to be who we are without teachers and mentors and those who came before us.

Rabbi Michael Lerner brings the point home for us in the U.S.:

Part of the cherished myth of this country is the notion of the rugged individualist who makes his own way – the rugged individualist is almost always male in this myth – without anyone else’s help.

This image was never true. Even on the frontier, people relied on their neighbors, on the animals that provided their food, and later on those who built and operated the railroads, bringing supplies to frontier towns.

Today it is even less possible to be a rugged individualist. We can’t drive on a road, operate an appliance, run water, or make a phone call without benefiting from the work of countless other human beings, some here in the United States and some in other parts of the world. ⁱ

We were not made to depend merely on our rugged, self-sufficient selves.

Which is not quite the point of our reading from Paul’s letter to the Church in Corinth this morning. But it’s not entirely NOT the point either.

You may know that Paul tends to think highly of himself. Even when he says he doesn’t want to boast, as in this morning’s reading, he tells us that he surely could boast if he wanted to. And then Paul mentions an affliction of some sort: “a thorn was given me in the flesh.” Now he never says what exactly that means. (And the lack of clarity has sparked all sorts of speculative suggestions.) This “thorn” may be something physical. It may be something more spiritual or emotional or psychological. We really don’t know.

But we do know what Paul makes of it in the end. He says that it keeps him from thinking too highly of himself. Eugene Peterson puts it like this:

So I wouldn’t get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations.

Paul says that this “thorn” – whatever it is – keeps him from thinking too highly of himself, his strength, his ability to pull himself up by his bootstraps. The gift of the “thorn” is that it obliges him not to depend entirely on himself. He needs to rely on God, on Christ.

And rely on others, too, I think.

Or maybe I’m just reading that last thought back into Paul’s story because of what I hear in this morning’s gospel. Jesus, after his disappointing trip back to his hometown, heads back out to other villages. And then he calls the twelve and he sends them out. He tells them to take nothing with them except a walking stick and the shoes on their feet.

Take nothing for the journey, he says to them, except a staff ... oh, and a companion. Don’t leave home without a traveling companion. Jesus sends them out not entirely on their own but in pairs, two by two.

It’s a journey of interdependence, no disciple going it alone, each disciple learning to depend on the other, each disciple learning to be dependable *for* the other.

And Jesus tells these pairs of disciples to seek out a wider interdependency. He sends them out to look for those who will house them and feed them and support them, making room for them to give back to their hosts – gifts of healing and opening the door for new possibilities for life.

I imagine there would be days when each of those sent forth would grow tired of it all and want to stop. On those days, they have a companion to hold them accountable to the task at hand.

I imagine there would be days when they’d face opposition and denunciation, when they be rejected and feel dejected and found wanting. (Jesus himself, as we heard this morning, had a day like that when he went to his hometown.) On those hard, disappointing days, they have someone who can console them and encourage them and reassure them.

Through it all, I imagine that Jesus sent them out in the hopes that they would learn that they were better off together than they would have been setting off on a journey all on their own.

As a former colleague of mine was quick to say (and as I have oft repeated):

In the strange and profound math of life in community, a joy shared is doubled,
and a sorrow shared is cut in half.

Or again, as Robert Fulghum concluded in his wonderful essay about how all he ever needed to learn he learned in kindergarten:

... it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world it is
best to hold hands and stick together.

Clearly, it's a lesson we still need to learn. The past 16 months have been trying to teach us what we should have learned in kindergarten.

At our worst, we have been pitted against one another, making choices about physical-distancing and mask-wearing and even vaccinations based only on personal rights and individual liberties.

But at our best, we have made choices based on love of neighbor, not merely love of self:

- We have not met in person out of concern for our neighbors, and just ourselves, and to safeguard the public good.
- We have put on masks less for our own personal safety, and more to protect those we meet from the droplets we exhale. (And when we all wear masks, we do so to take care of each other, an act of interdependence.)
- And we have rejoiced in vaccines that protect us individually and allow to do our part to set our world right again.

This year, as we celebrate the 4th of July, may we celebrate the highest aspirations of our flawed forebears by committing ourselves to carry on what they so nobly began, and so form a "more perfect" union. And may we "hang together" and celebrate our interdependence as well.

Let us seek the wellbeing of all people and safeguard the inalienable rights of every man, woman, and child. And let us never fail to be amazed by the wonder of all that is: "this fragile earth, our island home," and the astonishing people who share this planet with us.

We're all in this together. The freedom of one is the freedom of all. The pain of one is the pain of all. The breath of one is the breath of all ... and the life-giving breath of God fills us all.

ⁱ Michael Lerner @ <https://www.tikkun.org/interdependence-day/>.