

Independence for Whom?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
July 5, 2020
(text from live-streamed worship)

Call to Worship

Is it good to be gathered together, wherever and whoever we are:

Gathered for worship –

To pause in the midst of full lives, to reflect in the midst of whatever challenges we face personally, and in the midst of the challenges we face together.

To pause... touch deeper wellsprings of our lives and of our love... so that we might better be channels of life's blessings and of love to others... to the larger life we share.

Lighting of the Flaming Chalice

I light the flaming chalice of our free faith, symbol of Unitarian Universalism, linking us to all those who light a chalice this morning, reminding us of our gathered strength and resolve, reminding us of the values we share... values and qualities of kindness and compassion, of understanding and respect, of the quest for justice and peace, grounded in love.

Meditation and Prayer

May we slow down, breathe into this moment, become more fully awake to this moment we share in spirit... And from this deeper presence in the moment, our hearts' yearnings arise, prayers to the God of our hearts, God of all blessings...

Continued prayers of gratitude... for all the helpers and healers and for the courageous justice-seekers in our troubled land... and prayers holding each individual in our community of faith, in the midst of whatever personal sorrow or challenges each may be facing.

May we pause in silent communion... wherever we are... whoever we are... whatever our circumstances...

Song – We Shall Not Be Moved (*African American spiritual and Civil Rights anthem*)

We shall not, we shall not be moved (2x)
Like a tree planted by the water, we shall not be moved.

All of us together, we shall not be moved...
Black, brown, and white together, we shall not be moved...
On the road to justice, we shall not be moved...

Reading

From a speech by Frederick Douglass, July 5, 1852, to the Rochester (New York) Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society:

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy -- a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.

Message "Independence for Whom?"

Coronavirus restrictions led to a very different July 4 this year – here in Hingham: no fireworks, no Road Race, no pancake breakfast, no parade.

And much as I have enjoyed Hingham's 4th for the past 33 years, this pause in our usual way of marking the day felt right this year – during this time not only of pandemic, but of the rising for racial justice.

For as a person with white skin, it has been easy, too easy, for me to simply enjoy the day each year without reflecting too much about the whole story of the history of this land in which we live. Not so easy if your family roots here extend millennia into the past or if your family heritage is one of slavery and Jim Crow.

What would we think, after all, if today, in the 21st century, a country declared its freedom from an occupying power... yet held and continued to hold a large portion of its population in slavery?

This is, of course, what happened here in 1776.

Though it was even worse – for to put it more accurately, one portion of the occupying power declared its freedom from the other portion of the occupying power.

For not only were millions enslaved by the occupiers... the land they were all living on had been taken from those who had lived here for thousands of years... and who lived here still.

Here we have it, the twin original sins of our nation, a nation founded by European colonial powers: the attempted genocide of the first peoples of this so-called American continent; and the enslavement of those forcibly brought here from the African continent. The legacies of both sins plague us to this day.

So... how ought we to mark Independence Day?

It is not just a political question. It is, it seems to me, a spiritual question too – as it also seemed to Frederick Douglass.

Douglass, in his July 5, 1852 speech, began by affirming the bravery of the founders, and the genius of the Declaration of Independence and its principles of freedom and equality. No doubt he meant what he said, but it was also a clever rhetorical move! For then, having gained the additional sympathy of the already sympathetic anti-slavery audience, he went on, as we heard earlier, to scathingly affirm the utter inadequacy of the realization of those principles as he talked of *your* Fourth of July – not his or his enslaved sisters and brothers.

Even so, he then concluded – another good rhetorical move – with hope that the nation was changing, and changing for the better: “I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery.”

And Douglass was correct in that affirmation... but only if narrowly understood. For as we know, or ought to know, though slavery itself nominally ended with Emancipation just a little more than a decade after Douglass’s speech, much of the long journey to genuine freedom and equality for all continues... much of the work of ending systemic racism and white supremacy is still before us.

How could this be, over a century and a half after Emancipation?

Well, we know, or should know, that much of Douglass’s speech could be given today and be as accurate to our times as it was to his... because our history since Emancipation has been a journey through failed reconstruction, convict labor, Jim Crow, segregation in both South and North, and, even through the successes of the Civil Rights Movement, the continuation of systemic racism in policing, education, health care, housing, and on and on... to this day: laid so starkly before us in the video of George Floyd’s murder, and too many others, and through the health inequities in the midst of the pandemic. Can we deny any longer the reality of systemic racism?

Frederick Douglass was speaking, preaching really, to a largely white and generally sympathetic audience – it was an Anti-Slavery Society after all – so in a similar spirit he speaks to us still, a largely white and sympathetic congregation, calling us to bring our sympathetic hearts to the work of our hands, to be among those helping our nation to live up to the ideals in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution.

Calling us, too, to the spiritual work that, in his view and mine, must be the foundation of the political work. For Douglass, a Christian, it meant being grounded in the prophets’ calls to justice, Isaiah and the rest, and to Jesus’s call to care for the least of these.

For us, whatever our spiritual grounding, it means reminding ourselves of who we most truly are as human beings, part and parcel of one another, our highest aim therefore to seek the well-being of all, which means moved to help create a nation that establishes justice, promotes the general welfare, and secures the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity... as the preamble to our Constitution affirms.

Well... the fact that Douglass’s speech is still just about as relevant today as it was 168 years ago speaks to how deeply the trauma of slavery and racism is woven into the fabric of our nation. But if his words awaken in us a sense shame that we haven’t come further on the journey

to justice for all, then all is not lost; for this means that Douglass's words also call us to continue the journey – yes, grateful for progress that has been made, but more fully aware of all that yet needs to be accomplished.

I know I have not paid nearly enough attention to my own white privilege and not been nearly as deeply aware of the racial and other inequities built into our society, not been nearly as aware as I must be of the legacy and present reality of white supremacy in our nation. I must change. We must change. Our nation must change.

So... may we all, grounded in a deep knowing, heart and mind, of who we are as human beings, each of our lives interwoven with all lives, keep on – so that each Independence Day will mark further measures of progress on this journey to true freedom, equality, and justice for all.

So may it be.

Song – If I Had a Hammer (*Pete Seeger and Lee Hayes*)

Closing Words and Benediction

May we use the hammers, bells, and songs of our lives to be among those who help to forge a society of more justice, freedom, and love for our brothers and sisters all over this land... and around the world.

Be well. Be safe.

Take care of yourself, take care of one another... take care of everyone...

As best we can.

May it always be so. Blessed be. Amen.