

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Independence Day
July 4, 2021; Year B, Proper for 7/4
The Episcopal Church of the Atonement
The Rev. Nancy Webb Stroud

Deuteronomy 10:17-21; Hebrews 11:8-16; Matthew 5:43-48; Psalm 145:1-9

I speak to you in the Name of the God who loves the stranger. And I ask that you join me in thanking the native peoples on whose traditional and ancestral land we stand: the Pocumtuk People. We honor their elders: past, present, and future.

Just a little more than a year ago, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts made Juneteenth a state holiday. And of course, just a couple of weeks ago, the United States Congress made Juneteenth a federal holiday. Last year, I resolved to make Juneteenth a day when our church office was closed—not realizing, I guess, that it would fall on a Saturday, making an already feeble gesture just really pathetic.

I call it a feeble gesture, because it has only been in the last couple of years that I even knew what Juneteenth was. And I still have trouble getting my head around the fact that the Emancipation Proclamation did not magically free enslaved people in this country and make everything better. When I read American History in elementary school and in high school, I wanted it to be like that. I could maybe accept the shameful conduct of Americans who went before me (including my own family)—but only if we kept getting better and better.

But, of course, we know better. Freedom did not happen in the blink of an eye. The Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1, 1863. The State of Texas didn't enact it until June 19, 1865, two and a half years later—a kind of rolling tide of freedom? And so, over the next century and a half, Juneteenth became the day that celebrated the end of chattel slavery in the United States. I don't know when I first heard about Juneteenth—but I never thought of it until last year, when Massachusetts adopted the holiday.

For the past several months, parishioner Kathy DeJean and I have led a Sacred Ground Discussion group here at Atonement. This is a 10-session series sponsored by The Episcopal Church, full of videos, magazine articles, and book selections, to help us talk together about race in America and race in the church. The first five sessions are a history lesson. Now, our Sacred Ground group is a pretty well-educated group—we boast lots of college degrees and a few graduate degrees, too. We are teachers and business people and artists. Several of us were raised in The Episcopal Church, and all of us are committed members of Atonement. And there was so much that we didn't know!

It kind of made me feel a little better about not realizing that the Emancipation Proclamation hadn't solved that pesky old problem of slavery. Kind of. A little. It was very humbling to realize how much I had never learned—and to realize, too, how much I had never been taught. I was sharing this insight with my children at dinner a few weeks ago, and a friend of my son told me that at her high school in Florida, she was taught that on some plantations, slaves and owners had happy lives together. In the 21st century. In an American public high school. My son's friend was outraged, even all these years later—and I am outraged on her behalf. How could anyone teach about happy slaves?

But then, how could anyone think it good and holy to take native children away from their parents and teach them to forget their culture? How could people beat and kill Asian Americans because of a virus that killed people in China before it spread to the United States? How can we treat one another with such cruelty?

Today is the Fourth of July. We celebrate our nation's Independence from England, and Bill and I are looking forward to our annual viewing of the musical movie *1776*. We will sing along with every song—and recite most of the dialogue by heart. And we will remember much that was brave and inspiring. Those well-educated white men (32 of whom would start a new church not governed by the King of England—and here we are today)—those old guys did a brave thing and began a noble experiment in democracy nearly 250 years ago. And I can celebrate that. But as much as I love a good movie musical, I am thinking of drawing inspiration from an even older source today.

Last year, a clergy friend and I mused on the closeness of these two days—Juneteenth and Independence Day, and we suggested that there should be a church season—a *Freedomtide*, you might call it. A time to reflect on what freedom means, and how to bring it true for all the ones God loves.

After these months standing on Sacred Ground with our study group, I realize more clearly than ever before that the work begun so long ago on July 4th and June 19th, and all those other days since the end of the 16th century—the work begun then continues. *Be perfect*, says Jesus, *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect*. Perfect? We are not even close.

Be perfect is the last line of today's Gospel—the last line of Holy Scripture from a group of lessons that are appointed for the church to read every year on the 4th of July. A fundamental American principle is freedom of religion. But a fundamental Christian principle is responsibility to neighbor and stranger. And that means that Christians must engage in civic life. One way that the church does that is by honoring national days—there are special prayers for Independence Day and Thanksgiving Day in our prayer book, and prayers for our national life. There is a section in *The Hymnal 1982* for national songs—and we will sing one of them at the end of our service today. Americans are free from religion. But religious people are not free from America. A lot of us live here.

So what do the lessons for Independence Day tell us about God? What do they tell us about ourselves? How do they help us to engage in civic life in a country born of such high principles with a history of such pain and strife?

In Deuteronomy, that book from the Hebrew Scriptures that gives details on God's law, we are told to love the stranger. We should provide food and clothing for those we don't even know. Why? Well, God loves the stranger, and we are told, *You also shall love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt*. In other words—from God's point of view, civic boundaries are not that important. A person is only a stranger from another person's point of view. God sees us all and God loves us all.

We are used to the Psalms being all about God, of course, but verse 8 of Psalm 145 is particularly compelling: *The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, *slow to anger and of great kindness*. In Deuteronomy we are told to love the stranger because God loves the stranger. Are we supposed to be slow to anger and show kindness, too?

Be perfect, says Jesus. We are not really sure what Jesus means by that. But our first two readings from Holy Scripture tell us some things that God does. And we can do them too—be kind, keep a lid on our anger, feed hungry people. We can do these things.

But what then? Well, I am not the only one who makes the connection between the historical and the religious. *The Letter to the Hebrews*, where we find our second lesson, is one of my favorite literary works. First of all, it is a sermon, not a letter. And perhaps it was even preached in one sitting! So—a sermon of a couple of hours in length. Yes, that does sound good to me! But I also love it because what it says about God is that love is not a zero-sum game. You can love some people without hating other people. Love is not a balancing act, says this long-winded preacher. Love is a life-giving force. And then the preacher describes the things that God has already done in history, to get us ready to accept what our loving God will do for us.

According to the logic of the preacher, having a country, or a homeland, or even an independent nation is just a rehearsal for the good thing that is to come. We learn to have a beautiful city as a way of preparing to live in the beautiful city that God has already prepared for us. And the really beautiful thing about this city is that it is prepared precisely for the strangers and foreigners.

Be perfect, says Jesus. He is not saying, “I am only speaking to the perfect ones.” He is not saying, I am only speaking to the white ones. Or, the male ones. Or, the educated ones. He reminds us that God *makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous*. Jesus speaks to anyone with a heart to listen.

So, how do we do it? How do we engage in civic life—today, in a pandemic-ravaged world filled with violence and racial strife—how do we participate in our nation AND also look to the beautiful city that God is preparing for us?

The lesson of holy Scripture is very clear—we live in this world and long for the next by **loving our enemies and praying for those who persecute us. By loving, feeding, and clothing the stranger. By being slow to anger and showing great kindness.**

America is a country that is free from religion. But we who follow Jesus don’t get to live in America for free. This great democratic experiment needs us. Our nation needs the religious principles that we are taught in our holy Scripture: love and care and great kindness. That is how God blesses America. It’s on us. America is sacred ground, and we can no longer claim ignorance about our history. We must own it—and change it. Love and care and great kindness will bless our nation and at length, will bring us home to *a better country, that is, a heavenly one*.