Sermon: “Pick Up the Mantle" June 30, 2019

Texts: Psalm 77:1-20 & 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

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This week is the 4th of July national holiday. Hopefully that means that you’ll have time to slow down and rest, eat some good food and share time with friends or family. If national holidays can help us slow down and rest a little more often, then I suppose that is one good thing.

But if every year on the 4th of July and on some of the other national holidays, you feel some tension, or dis-ease or even anger, then let me say - you’re not alone. I feel this too. And in a way, *my hope is that we all do* feel some tension, disease and even anger.

Any national holiday begs the question: What is it that we are celebrating? Who’s victory are we celebrating? And at the expense of whom? Which version of history are we remembering? And how does that version of history play a part in shaping our national identity?

Now, the 4th of July as we probably know, is the celebration of American Independence from the British Crown and it commemorates the Declaration of Independence of the United States on July 4, 1776. The War of Independence was in some places intermingled with the dismantling of slavery which was abolished in Vermont in 1777, in Massachusetts, in 1783, in Pennsylvania in 1780 (although in PA it was a conservative gradual abolition of slavery). There were black troops who were part of the fight for American independence.

However, did you know that more black troops fought for their freedom on the side of the British Crown than in the continental army during the war? It is estimated that 20,000 black troops served in the British army compared to roughly 5000 in the the continental army *because* of the higher likelihood and hope of their gaining their freedom with the British. It certainly was not clear at all nor was it likely that African Americans would be awarded any freedom should America as a country become free of the Crown.

In other words, there is an irreconcilable clash in the colonists war of independence and the freedom of African Americans. There is a clash. This hypocritical contradiction has been well known by people throughout the years, primarily known by those whose freedom and equality was not gained by winning the war. The English writer Samuel Johnson posed the question in 1775: “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes?” Or as Frederick Douglass asked in his deeply moving speech that he gave speaking about the 4th of July holiday. He spoke these words in 1852:

*Why am I called upon to speak here today?  What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence?” …*

*Fellow citizens, pardon me. Allow me to ask, “What to the American slave is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all the other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.”*

Douglass suggests that the positive statements about American values of liberty, citizenship and freedom were an offense to enslaved people. An offense because of the merciless exploitation and cruelty and torture to which African Americans were subjected. “True Christians, said Douglass, “should not stand idly by while the rights and liberty of others are stripped away.”

We don’t like to complicate history by and large as white Americans. And in terms of national memory and identity, we try to preserve that image of greatness and superiority. In so doing we erase the complexity, we erase the stories of people whose freedom was never considered. That is why on the 4th of July, we have reason as Frederick Douglass calls us, as *Christians* to feel deep tension, dis-ease and yes anger at how we continue to deny freedom, equality and citizenship to people of color in our country.

Who is free today? Who is free this week? And who is *not free* because of the sins of this nation that we try so hard to hide? Who is not at the table? Who is not allowed in our country? And how does that denial of freedom now relate to the past? These are not political questions. These are *Christian* questions. These are the kinds of questions Jesus would ask. Who is in bondage? Who is not at the table? Who is not being allowed access to basic resources and to quality of life?

We continue to hear hearing horrific news about a form of neo-slavery. In Clint Texas, more details have come to light about the torture of migrant children in the concentration camp located there. There is some argument about whether or not to call a place like this a “concentration camps.” From what we are learning and from people who are seeing the conditions, from leaders in the Jewish community to survivors of the Japanese internment camps in the U.S., they are confirming that this language of “concentration camps” is adequate to describe the torturous conditions of these camps. We will see children die. And we are being asked to face again the truth that our nation has and can and will systematically abuse and terrorize people of color. Children are not exempt.

And as the 4th of July holiday approaches my feelings are far from celebration, they are of disgust at our nation’s capacity to inflict terror and violence and death upon children, all the while proclaiming in contradiction how much we value liberty, citizenship and the pursuit of happiness.

And I know that what I’m sharing this morning is sounding a bit dismal, but it seems to me that as people of faith and as Christians we have a mandate, we have a call to listen to the cries of the afflicted. The cry of the poor, the cry of the child, is the cry of Jesus. The cry of Jesus is the cry of God. What do we do when God’s children are being tortured? We should not stand idly by, says Douglass, while the rights and liberty of others are stripped away.

Psalm 77 starts out with cries of affliction. Cries of pain and abandonment. It’s like we’re hearing the cries of the enslaved Hebrews, the enslaved African Americans, the cries of the Indigienous, the cries of the enslaved migrants in Clint, Texas:

“I cry out loud to God! My whole being refuses to be comforted! I moan when I think of God. Has God’s steadfast love now finally come to an end? Is God’s promise over for future generations?

This poet is not just crying for herself she is crying for all her people who have been displaced and held captive by a foreign power.

But notice what she does in her grief. She makes herself remember history. And it’s like she’s choosing to remember Juneteenth instead of the 4th of July. She’s choosing to remember the story of emancipation and the fight of her people for their freedom.

“**I will** remember the Lord’s deeds” she says. “**I will** remember your wondrous acts from long ago” “**I will** remember when the waters saw you O God, and when a way went straight through the sea. Though your footprints were unseen o God, You still lead your people like a flock.” **I will remember.**

And it is in remembering this prophetic history, that enables this poet to be restored again to hope. You see our ability to remember God’s saving activity in the past, to remember God’s saving presence with our ancestors in the faith, is to begin to hope again and it is to begin to see ourselves again as instruments in God’s liberating work.

Stories of resistance are all throughout the Bible. From the midwives Shiprah and Puah to Moses and Miriam, to Elijah and Elisha. Elisha took the mantle from the prophet Elijah somewhat reluctantly. “I don’t know if I can handle this prophet task, Elisha thought. This is heavy, grief-laden work,” But he took the mantle anyway because he knew it was God’s work and it was his work to do. And that mantle continued to be passed down through the ages. Jesus eventually took the mantle of the prophets, and then Jesus gave that mantle to his disciples and said, now *you* are the hands and feet and heart and mind called to this work. And now *we* are Jesus’ disciples, *we* are now the recipients of the mantle. Jesus even said “you will do greater things than I” to his disciples. But we like to think that Jesus was a saint cast in stone, a shrine to be worshipped and adored instead of a Way and a Life to be followed. Jesus didn’t ask for our worship, he asked us to follow him. He asked us to do great things. We are empowered to take the mantle from Jesus, and to be his hands and feet.

As Christians, as people of faith, we have been confronted by the horror, we have been confronted by the prophets about our sins, we feel ourselves involved and enmeshed in it and disgusted by it. We see the children dying. And we will not become numb to this terrorizing. We will tell the truth about it, and we will be the hands and feet of Jesus.

There are ways we can act. And I want us to take time to share those ways. I have some suggestions of ways we can be engaged in lifting our voices to end the torture of children in these concentration camps: 1. Jean Erb has drafted a letter that we are sending out on behalf of our church to leaders in our denomination and in our government to speak out to end these camps. I give thanks for Jean’s passion and work in leading us. 2. We are also in communication with New Sanctuary Movement and we are planning to organize an action on Friday, July 12. If you can mark your calendars now for that date. Friday July 12. We don’t have a time yet, but we will let you know. And please let me know if you’d like to be involved in organizing and planning for this. We could use your help. It is my understanding that there is a call for a national day of action on July 12, and so we want to be sure that Philadelphia is among the places speaking out.

There is a also a document that I will send out in email form with links to different ways that you can help end immigrant detention. And I’ve printed out this document as well. It will be circulating during coffee hour. I’d like to ask you to commit to doing two items on this list. And if you are involved in some way already and would like to share about it our time of sharing prayers in the service, please do so. We can continue to talk about ways to act today and in the coming week, so that we can be the hands and feet of Jesus right now.

My call to all of us this week, to me included, is this: Let’s pick up the mantle. And on the fourth of July this year, let’s share stories of resistance. Let’s tell stories about the courage of people of color. Let’s tell stories of those who have stood up to cruelty and tyranny of our government. Let’s tell stories of the prophets in our lives who have picked up the mantle. And let’s have the courage to see ourselves as recipients of that mantle. We are called to do great things together. To be people of hope and courage. Amen