

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Life More Abundant and Free
Romans 6.12-23
July 2, 2023

Today we draw to a close our Season of Justice and Peace here on Independence Day weekend. We remember that Independence Day is not a Christian or liturgical holiday, but we have nothing against all the hot dogs and fireworks and watermelon on Tuesday. And nothing against taking pride in our nation and taking a moment to be thankful for all that has gotten us here and sustained us through it all.

If you linger on the meaning of the holiday beyond its nitrates and boom-booms, there's much to be proud of for sure. This is a nation founded on supremely high ideals framed by the revolutionaries in the loftiest terms. They imagined, and generations have defended and extended a nation based on ideals like all people are created equal and have rights. While July 4 isn't a liturgical holiday and the American flag is best kept on flag poles and out of church pulpits, there's a congruence and symmetry between the high ideals of the framers and the character of Christian community.

At the same time, however (and it's a big however), there are things we need to keep in mind as well: 1) the paradox of our nation of falling short of our national ideals, even making a mockery of them; and 2) that Christian community goes even further and even higher than the American dream. Let's consider both of these today that we may know how to pray for our nation and how to pray for its people in these days and how we might live faithfully in Christian hope and Christian witness.

In Romans 6, St. Paul asks a potent question in any context, "What advantage did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed?" This is a potent question. I don't think Paul had intimate knowledge of specific things the particular Roman Christians had done and for which they were ashamed. This is a general question that applies to each of us, individually and nationally. What did you get from what you're ashamed of? Was it worth it? Would you do it again? What did it cost you, and do you even know? The end of those things that are not of God is death.

The Apostle is not trying to get people to dwell in misery and shame on their past sins. Quite the opposite. This is an epistle of freedom: "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift." Romans 3.23. Romans 5.17 describes "the abundance of grace and free gift of righteous reign in life through Jesus Christ." And 8.1 declares, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." The Apostle is the apostle of grace who desires that people never go back to life before Christ.

Yet we are not to forget where we came from—which may be our shame and God's grace and is the high calling the gospel, and the Apostle, calls for in Christian community and witness.

This applies to each of us individually, and it applies to collective groups as well, including as we reflect today on our nation. It's a buzzkill move to discuss our national shame on the national day of celebration of independence, but the two go hand in hand. The same revolutionaries that declared all people are created equal also personally enslaved people. And the nation in which all people are created equal instituted a system of slavery. It was personal and it was systematic. And it made a mockery of their ideals. And they knew it. Some of them knew well. But didn't have the imagination or courage sufficient to change in those days. Our national celebration of freedom goes hand in hand with our national shame of slavery. This has always been the tension. Frederick Douglass in 1852 pointedly asked, "What to the American slave is your 4th of July but a day that reveals to him, more than all the other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is a constant victim?"

Things have changed much since 1852. The eradication of slavery was our finest moment. Emancipation, Juneteenth, Civil Rights movement. The world is a different place for everyone, black and white. Yet we do well to remember and to lament, even on days of celebration. Christians in particular know how to do this. Our worship of God always swings in the orbit of praise and confession, thanksgiving and repentance, cross and resurrection.

It's also important to remember and lament because even though much has changed, the vestiges of our history are very real and present in the segregations, inequalities, and unevenness of our society, not to mention the prejudices of racism of so very many individuals toward their fellow man. We are, indeed, an imperfect union.

On this, there is broad agreement, even if there's not agreement on what should be done about it now. This week, the Supreme Court struck down affirmative action admissions for highly selective colleges. As far as I understand it, they focused on the 14th Amendment which assures Equal Protection under the law for American citizens. In other words, the 14th amendment says play fair. Life should be fair for everyone. The Court ruling was that affirmative action isn't fair.

In practicality, the ruling doesn't affect that many people, and universities will probably find ways creative around it to diversify their student bodies. In larger terms, the justices' arguments for and in dissent of the ruling put their finger directly on the enduring problem and pain that our cultures and institutions still carry. Two justices in particular, Justice Clarence Thomas who is against affirmative action and Justice Ketanji Brown who is for affirmative action, represent very different perspectives on what should be done, even as they each recognize the suffering and shame from those things we have done. For Justice Thomas, "We are all equal, and should be treated equally before the law without regard to our race. Only that promise can allow us to look past our differing skin colors and identities and see each other for what we truly are: individuals with unique thoughts, perspectives, and goals, but with equal dignity and equal rights under the law."

Thomas holds the ideal of a color-blind society: "While I am painfully aware of the social and economic ravages which have befallen my race and all who suffer discrimination... I hold out enduring hope that this country will live up to its principles so clearly enunciated in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States: that all men are created equal, are equal citizens, and must be treated equally before the law."

Justice Brown, on the other hand, dissents that a colorblind society is neither true nor the goal in the tragedy and messiness of addressing the gross inequalities of our past. “Those who demand that no one think about race refuse to see, much less solve for, the elephant in the room – the race-linked disparities that continue to impede achievement of our great Nation’s full potential.” The argument that affirmative action programs are unfair “blinks both history and reality in ways too numerous to count... the response is simple: Our country has never been colorblind.”

I don’t know whether the admission practices of highly selective colleges and universities should practice affirmative action toward applicants of color, though it seems to me that something like it is for the good. But what do I know about elite universities and colleges? I went to A&M. It does seem ironic, at least, that universities are allowed to and eagerly take affirming action toward sons and daughters of donors and alumni, which they are still free to do. Is that fair in some kind of different way? The larger point is that the argument about college admission is one complicated, sticky part of the much larger, national issue: what to do with our history and the inequalities and suffering we institutionalized in different ways and from which some of us in broad strokes benefited and other suffered? Actually, I should be more precise: from which in broad strokes white people benefit and black people suffer. Every boom of every Independence Day firework still punctuates that question and invitation to lean forward into our community toward a more perfect union.¹

But we aren’t people of bombs bursting in air; we are a people of bread, broken and shared. God’s justice isn’t just the absence of institutionalized injustice, and God’s peace isn’t just the absence of outward conflict. Israel wasn’t judged on whether they treated everyone under the ideal that everyone has equal opportunity but on how the powered and privileged cared for in practical ways, the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner. Remember the prophet Jeremiah faulted the priests for saying ‘peace, peace’ when there was no peace. And Amos accused the religious leaders of putting on a sacred show when God wanted justice and righteousness to flow like a mighty river. And Micah asked simply what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God, implying that all three conspire together for our sanctification. And Jesus told stories all the time of uneven treatment from love: the prodigal son’s return home to a lavish feast, the woman washing his feet with costly

¹ Equal protection in our constitution requires that each person be treated as an equal. It is important because from a moral perspective, each person matters equally and should be treated by the government in a way that respects her equal worth. The court decision moves philosophically in the direction of colorblindness, which in theoretical terms is right and consistent with both the framer’s aspirations and with Martin Luther’s King’s dream. And yet at the same time, in practical terms, is still a fantasy and falls short of justice, at least for Christians. While this statement is one that most – perhaps all – people would agree with, it also masks enormous disagreement. People disagree about what treating each other as equals requires. To some, consideration of race in admissions violates that mandate because they think that using race, even in part, to affect decisions constitutes an insult. To others, the government can attend to race and still treat people as equals because consideration of race merely recognizes the fact that a person’s race affects the person’s life story in countless ways. One can see the debate between the majority and the dissenting opinions in this case as about these two ideas.
https://news.virginia.edu/content/uva-law-professor-explains-us-supreme-courts-affirmative-action-decision?utm_source=DailyReport&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=news

perfume. Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. In Jesus, grace is not measured out by the spoonful, but packed down and overflowing and offered with open hands.

The Christian vision of justice and peace travels further than the political horizon. Christian vision isn't just about leveling a playing field, it's about truth telling and confession and abundant grace for the other. The question seems to still be here in the messiness of our history and desire to live into our ideals: if not that, then what? If not affirmative action for admission to selective colleges, ok, but what? Because it's not enough to say, race doesn't matter when race definitely has always mattered.

St. Paul's Romans is addressed directly to Gentile and Jewish Christians trying to make a church together. This was a radical and difficult experiment, but one they felt called to by the power and name of Jesus Christ and in the call of their baptism. It was not easy. The first few chapters break down both Jew and Gentile for their arrogance and lift up both for what they bring to the common table of Christ. By chapter 5, we're all in this together, all sons and daughters of Adam, all fallen in need of salvation. By chapter 6, we're all called to a higher discipleship, one set free from the enslaving dominion of sin and released to serve God. In chapter 7, we aren't sure we're good enough, and we wonder why we don't live the way we want to live, but in Chapter 8, amidst the groaning of all creation and the ongoing suffering of God's children to be renewed in their relationship with their creator, nothing can separate any of us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Christian community is more than equal protection, we want flourishing, true freedom, the fullness of each person's createdness in the eyes of God, holiness. The nation at its best can only offer protection; we go further. And going further means we are not just protecting equal rights but practicing abundant grace.

And this is where we draw our Season of Justice and Peace to a close as we conclude the time between Juneteenth and July 4. We return our eyes to the church—it's hope and paradox, its high ideals and terrible failures. The church's life and witness in the world is needed as much now as ever. "The Church, if it is to be the Church, must be the revelation of that divine love which God "poured out into our hearts." Without this love nothing is "valid" in the Church because nothing is possible. The content of Christ's Eucharist is love, and only through love can we enter into it and be made its partakers." (Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*)

As we come to Christ's Eucharist, his table of abundant grace and love, may you be the sign of hope in the world for those who have lost hope. May you be the community of love in the world for those who have suffered greatly. May your faith draw people to Jesus Christ and through him into the beloved community of God's children. Amen.