

## Hope for the Next 250 Years

I passed a sign this week that read “Happy Birthday, America! Home of the free because of the brave.” It seemed to me, as I read it, that it uplifts the military sacrifice of our 1776 militia men and patriotic women (some of whom passed as militia men themselves) without acknowledging that a nation’s identity is not the product of its military might, but of its deepest convictions. The military, and they are brave and we are grateful for those who give all for those who cannot, is the effect of standing by the mores and values and rights of our republic, not the cause of them. Perhaps a better birthday slogan for our country would be: “Here’s to 250 more years striving for equality, independence, democracy, and freedom: values worth defending at great cost!” Not as catchy, I know, but more accurate? More useful, meaningful, responsible and good?

In our country’s history of men and women and folks striving for the more perfect democratic union, we can name many, but Frederick Douglass seems the best voice to speak to our current national situation. In a speech to Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1852, Frederick Douglass, the once enslaved man from Maryland who became a vital voice in the abolitionist movement, gave the listeners both a word of warning and a word of hope. In the opening section, he writes: “The eye of the reformer is met with angry flashes, portending disastrous times; but his heart may well beat lighter at the thought that America is young, and that she is still in the impressible stage of her existence. May he not hope that high lessons of wisdom, of justice and of truth, will yet give direction to her destiny? Were the nation older, the patriot’s heart might be sadder, and the reformer’s brow heavier. Its future might be shrouded in gloom, and the hope of its prophets go out in sorrow. There is consolation in the thought, that America is young.”

I’ve returned again and again to the line, “*Were the nation older*, the patriot’s heart might be sadder, and the reformer’s brow heavier,” emphasis mine.

This July, the nation is older—174 years older than when Douglass gave this address. And I, a patriot and a reformer, am sadder and my brow is heavier. Perhaps we really only do understand ourselves as the home of the free because of the brave, a metaphor that favors dominance and might rather than the newborn aims of our founding documents to protect the freedom of all people to speak, think, vote, and legislate for their best interests and those of their fellow citizens.

Here’s Douglass, again, speaking about the concept in his 1852 time that the British of 1776 were in the wrong, in madness, even. “The madness of this course, we believe, is admitted now, even by England; but, we fear the lesson is wholly lost on our present rulers.”

In his day, the present was a place where chattel slavery still oppressed and detained millions of people. In his speech, Douglass wisely enumerates the valor and vision of the 1776 leaders, who set the ideals of the nascent nation above the military battles, establishing that freedom and equality caused the Revolutionary War, not the other way around. Speaking to his own time, he writes, “We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future. To all inspiring motives, to noble deeds which can be gained from the past, we are welcome. But now is the time, the important time.”

Then, as now, his country was deeply divided. He said, “Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine.”

*“This Fourth July is yours, not mine.”*

I join with many others in this sentiment that names our American split-personality. And, like Douglass, I don’t feel less patriotic in my sorrow and distress, but more convicted to regain the ideals upon which our nation was founded—itsself fraught with terrible deeds by the powerful against the weak, but nonetheless providing a platform for a future that grows more perfect. As Maya Angelou wrote, “I did then what I knew how to do. Now that I know better, I do better.”

Douglass, wisely, bravely, perhaps prophetically (speaking truth to power) told the assembled listeners what it would mean to do better in 1852, naming our failures instead of allowing them to be cloaked in the celebration of July Fourth. “To forget them, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a reproach before God and the world. My subject, then, fellow-citizens, is AMERICAN SLAVERY.”

He called out the specific place where our nation was divided, where it needed to do better. He continued, “Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to

call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery—the great sin and shame of America!”

Today, as we celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the independence of the United States of America, I am turning to the present to “question and denounce, with all the emphasis I can command,” the sins that have taken the place of American chattel slavery.

In place of American chattel slavery, we have expanded the institution of mass incarceration, now pasting this brick edifice of indentured capitalism with the mortar of the detention of migrants—without even the due process we afford the rest of the incarcerated.

In place of American chattel slavery, we have enslaved voters of color with the judicial erosion of voting rights, turning an already dysfunctional democracy into a sham exercise that enshrines the already powerful in a burgeoning authoritarian state.

In place of American chattel slavery, we have built up a system of poverty in place of the system of public relief that was inaugurated with Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid. Our poor and sick are made poorer and sicker so that we can only make this one conclusion, they will wither and die, leaving the corporations and the billionaire (and now trillionaire) class exponentially richer than our neighbors.

In place of American chattel slavery, we have shackled those seeking abortion care for medical and personal reasons too myriad to enumerate. We have allowed a powerful class to paint only one picture of the person seeking an abortion—that this person is full of caprice, bloodlust, selfishness, and cruelty. Even though childbearing and rearing are often dangerous to the pregnant person and often increase the incidents of poverty and financial struggle for most American families.

In place of American chattel slavery, we have made LGBTQ+ persons into 3/5ths of a person. The hard fought acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ+ folks in our streets, in our homes, in our workplaces, in our government, and in our churches is being rewritten by an anxious Christianity that is using trans children’s bodies as a battle ground where the only casualty is the trans person who is more likely to take their own life or to continuing living in a body that is not consistent with their deepest sense of themselves.

In place of American chattel slavery, we have become worldwide overseers, taking the designs of empire we rejected in 1776 and using them for our own ends in the almost total genocide of Native Americans to the colonization of pacific islands to the military intervention in the east, the support of genocide in Palestine, the inability to commit to a rebuke of Russia, the kidnapping of foreign leaders—our foreign interventions are too many to list here.

In place of American chattel slavery, which twisted Christianity and the Bible to sanction slavery as a divine good, we have allowed Christian nationalism to similarly twist Sacred Writ into a racist, xenophobic, anti-science, homophobic, misogynist, patriarchal, authoritarian scheme for hell on earth for any who are not deemed saved by both conservative Christian doctrine or militaristic, patriotic blind-allegiance.

On this last point, I feel especially called to speak, as a lifelong Christian in a faith that has known so many different iterations of “orthodox” Christianity, and as a lifelong citizen of these United States, I want to call out the hypocrisy I see, the false idols, the soulless, compassionless church and the soulless, compassionless government that does not reflect God, Christ, or Spirit in its obscure glass, claiming that what they seem dimly, in part, is in fact seen clearly and completely. Again, Douglass speaks to the spirit of my mind and soul. “For my part, I would say, welcome infidelity! welcome atheism! welcome anything! in preference to the gospel, as preached by those Divines! They convert the very name of religion into an engine of tyranny, and barbarous cruelty, and serve to confirm more infidels. . . These ministers make religion a cold and flinty-hearted thing, having neither principles of right action, nor bowels of compassion. They strip the love of God of its beauty, and leave the throne of religion a huge, horrible, repulsive form. It is a religion for oppressors, tyrants, man-stealers, and thugs.”

To name these things is not to be unpatriotic or to be unGodly. It is to be brave because we are free. To celebrate what our Constitution and our Bibles lay out as the promise of a better future, a heaven on earth, where all the values of both the American experiment and the Christ I call King are able to flourish. I concur with Douglass once again:

*“Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented, of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. . . I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from “the Declaration of Independence,” the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age. Nations do not now stand in the same relation to each other that they did ages ago. No nation can now shut itself up, from the surrounding world, and trot round in the same old path of its fathers without interference. The time was when such could be done. Long established customs of hurtful character could formerly fence themselves in, and do their evil work with social impunity. Knowledge was then confined and enjoyed by the privileged few, and the multitude walked on in mental darkness. But a change has now come over the affairs of mankind.”*

I trust in a God who, in sending his son, Jesus called Christ, embraced the change needed in that day and provided a prophet and a messiah to lead us to the new, loving way of freedom described by Paul, “There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

I trust in the values of our nation in which our Constitution names its aims. “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.” I trust in the values listed in our Declaration of Independence:

*“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government.”*

With love and hope for our continued improvement in the eyes of God and our neighbors,

Pastor Nikki