

The Rev. Luke Selles
Feast of Independence
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“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” In the name of one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

250 years and a day ago, thirteen colonies of the Kingdom of Great Britain ratified a public justification of their war against the Crown. Fifty six members representing each of these thirteen colonies signed the document, an act of treason, which makes its defense upon the foundation of a claim to universal human rights: “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.”

Seventy six years later, Frederick Douglass, a man born in slavery, gave a speech in which he posed this question to his homeland: “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” While Douglass stands by the words and heroic intentions of the original founders of our nation, he points to the hypocrisy of the America of his time, which celebrated liberty while continuing to profit off of human enslavement and suffering. He specifically names the blasphemy against God undertaken by the White American Church, which in his time, sanctioned the institution of slavery and the bondage of “a seventh part of the inhabitants” of the country, not seeing in it an inconsistency with the “unalienable rights” endowed by one holy Creator as declared by our founding fathers. This inconsistency, Douglass himself declared to his White audience, “brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence, and your Christianity as a lie.”

The truth that Douglass poses to us, the American Church today, is that our nation, founded on the ideals of civil and religious liberty for all, has never lived up to our founding ideals as outlined 1776. Yet even in 1852, before the end of American slavery, Douglass declared his hope in those ideals. And although the fourth of July was for him a day of mourning, he pursued the realization of those ideals – through great hardship – to the end of his life.

Now, 174 years later, even while the cause of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness has been pursued by many heroes like Douglass, there is still a disparity in how our nation today grants those “unalienable rights.” The United States of America of 2026 is indisputably a global leader, but not in liberty – in mass incarceration. The Prison Policy initiative estimates that nearly 1% of the adult

population of the United States – both citizens and noncitizens alike – are incarcerated. That’s nearly 2 million people. And this does not include those under community supervision or parole, another 3.7 million. Long after slavery ended in this country and long before our current Administration took office, the land of freedom, liberty, and democracy continues to hold people in bondage.

So, what do we as people of faith, holding to the promises of our Creator, make of our nation’s continued failures to make good on those promises, especially for those who are weak, poor, and oppressed?

Our lesson today from the letter to the Hebrews, drawing on the story of one of the early ancestors of our faith, Abraham, names our human condition – our finitude before the eternal promises of God and God’s faithfulness. Abraham’s faithfulness eventually led to the formation of a people – the people of Israel – who God granted the Torah, the divine law, to guide them in becoming a nation before God. And as we see in our reading from the Torah, from the book of Deuteronomy, a core ideal of this divine law is mutual flourishing realized through love for neighbor, which includes those with blood and community ties as well as the stranger, the sojourner, the alien in their midst. For the people of Israel, God was the ultimate judge, a judge could not be bribed or coerced. As the God of their own deliverance from bondage in Egypt, they knew God heard the cry of the oppressed. Throughout the Torah, too, are reminders of Abraham’s own status as a sojourner, a stranger. These are reminders of the wholeness, the completeness of God’s perspective – of God’s justice and love for “every living thing” that God has made.

In our Gospel lesson from Matthew, we hear an excerpt of Jesus’ famous “Sermon on the Mount.” Here Matthew is deliberately echoing the prophet of Israel’s Exodus, Moses, and his ascent to the mountain to receive the divine law – Jesus and his followers ascend a mountain so that Jesus may give a new teaching on the same divine law. Amy Jill Levine, in her book “Sermon on the Mount,” describes Jesus’ method of teaching here about the Kingdom of Heaven, the divine, complete vision of God for their lives, as extending and building boundaries around the commandments in the law of Moses, the Torah.

Jesus is teaching his followers then and us now to not only love our *neighbor* as ourselves – which as we see in our first lesson includes those who are not part of the covenant community, who are legally separate or weak – but to love our *enemies* and those who persecute us – those who because of their ethnicity, religious practice, political beliefs, voting history, and even behavior towards us or those we love – stand against what we stand for. Levine likens this teaching to the prophet Jeremiah’s injunction to the people of Israel in exile to pray for their oppressors and for the good of the city they live in, even as it does them great harm, “for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Why would Jesus ask us to do this? The text tells us, so that we “may be children of God.” So that we may, like Jesus, dwell in the Kingdom of Heaven, where liberty, freedom, and justice are complete. Jesus concludes our passage saying, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Here the Greek word translated as perfect, *teleios*, does not mean less a lack of flaws, but completeness, maturity, of having reached the end, the full design, of something. If we love everyone, even those who wish us harm, we are witnessing to the love of God in Christ Jesus who died and was resurrected. We are becoming Christ-like for the sake of those God loves, even and including our enemies.

Now loving our enemies and praying for our persecutors doesn’t necessarily mean that we do not name injustice and struggle for liberty. Like Abraham and the writers of the Declaration of Independence and like Frederick Douglass and so many others, followers of Jesus are called to stake our whole lives on the promises of God, trusting in God to see our offering through to its completion. By loving our enemies, we are announcing our faith in Jesus, in God the merciful judge. We are desiring a better country, not just for ourselves, but in faith, for all. And in this act of faith we trust that indeed, God “has prepared a city” for us.