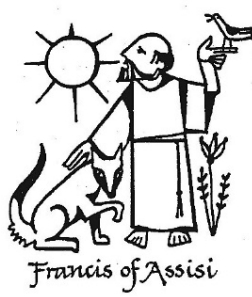


Dear friends in Christ



July 3, 2022, Fourth of July

“All Means All”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney, St. Francis Episcopal Mission
Deuteronomy 10:17-21; Psalm 145; Hebrews 11:8-16;
Matthew 5:43-48

Jai and I had a wonderful time on the East Coast. The highlight was meeting our future daughter-in-law's family at a Saturday barbecue. There are certainly a lot of them. Delightful people all. I especially hit it off with grandma. We both had a strong commitment to the Church in common.

We saw the “Lion King” for about the third or fourth time. We also saw a new play, “POTUS,” fashioned around the idea that “Behind every great dumbass are seven women trying to keep him alive.” It was a hoot and a holler. The actors were mostly Tony-award-winning thespians.

We brought home, or should I say, mailed home a number of books. AND we both brought home COVID-19. Rats!

We are now in for ten days of lock-down at Pilgrim Place. As our symptoms are minimal and as we're fully vaccinated and boosted, our health care provider was not overly concerned.

I also brought home a sprained ankle and a dinged up right hand. I missed a curb leaving the hotel as we were heading off to the airport. So, I'm a little worse for wear after that close encounter with the street.

We might say as much for our nation as we head into another Fourth of July weekend.

Our nation was born in violence, and we're still recovering from that imperfect origin. Much more transpired than that the mythic painting of the scene of the signing of the Constitution at Independence Hall by Howard Chandler Christy.

Much more transpired than conveyed in the sentimental patriotic songs we learned in the third grade. "Sweet land of Liberty?" – not for many.

Yes, America arrived in the annals of history, somewhat like me. A little dinged and banged up. Maybe a lot dinged up.

One of our greatest national orators, Frederick Douglass, a formerly enslaved person, gave the most profound expression of our failings as he in his seminal speech to the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Rochester, New York, July 5th, 1842. Herein he considered the meaning of our national holiday to those still held in bondage, "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?"

Reading from that speech:

"This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of your National Independence, and of your political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day. This celebration also marks the beginning of another year of your national life..."¹

Douglass continues on those included and those left out of the blessings of Liberty proclaimed in our Declaration of Independence:

"I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of glorious anniversary! 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 light and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine."²

¹ Frederick Douglass, "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?" delivered to the Ladies Anti-Slavery Society of Rochester, New York, July 5, 1842.

² Ibid.

As we approach another Fourth of July, those left out of the blessings of “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness” are legion.

Forty percent of us are unable to keep body and soul together. We have no roof over our heads. What liberty is enjoyed in such brutal circumstances? What Pursuit of Happiness?

My wife was talking with a couple of Black women after we exited the Museum of African-American History in Washington, D.C. The question was, had race relations significantly improved over these past years? She mentioned a similar conversation with a Black resident here at Pilgrim Place. While many white persons would respond in the affirmative, -- not so, people of color.

If your name is James, and not Jamal, you will more likely get called in for a job interview. If your name is Natisha rather than Natalie, your call won't be returned. Your suggestion will more likely than not be ignored, your rental application lost.

It's under the radar for most whites, not so much for the victims of such insults.

And, like Frederick Douglass, the indomitable human spirit rises to the ideal, to opportunity where it opens up.

President Reagan was fond of quoting from Puritan John Winthrop's “Sermon on Christian Charity,” of the image of a city on a hill – taken from the Gospel of Matthew. For Reagan it became a “shining city on a hill,” an image of America's prosperity and promise. We haven't quite arrived. Far from it.

Our national journey resonates deep in biblical memory, Abraham and Sarah being the original pioneers.

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”³

Deeply imbued with such imagery, the first settlers of this New World understood themselves to be embarked upon a religious, a godly mission. Only one thing --

³ Deuteronomy 11: 8-10, New Revised Version.

they completely discounted the original inhabitants who had arrived eons previous to their appearance on these shores.

They discounted those they brought in chains, women and indentured servants. Much of it's there in ***The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*** by Nikole Hannah Jones. When someone mentioned that this was a rather depressing book, my response is that's up to us to write the next chapter. "Depressing" is not foreordained.

Among the several books (okay, a lot of books) I brought home was an amazing novel written by a young woman from Oakland, California – ***Nightcrawling*** by Leila Mottley, designated poet laureate of that city at the age of seventeen.⁴

It is the devastating story of an orphaned young black woman trying just to survive in the midst of abject poverty and little formal education.

On the back of the book jacket Ayana Mathis celebrates the brilliance of this budding author's debut novel:

"Leila Motley's commanding debut, inspired by the life events of one woman's struggle for body and soul against crushing exploitation, is fierce and devastating, rendered with electrifying urgency by the colossal young talent."

That such a young Black woman can reach such acclaim in her youth, is another of the green sprouts in our national story. Hers is a godly mission indeed.

Through a drunken misunderstanding at a party, the protagonist ends up in a job she would never have imagined for herself, nightcrawling. Prostitution, in other words. As she attempts to deal with rising rent demands in a family fractured by death and imprisonment, she holds it together for a no-account brother with dreams of being a rap star and a neighbor boy abandoned by his mother. All this leads to being enmeshed in a scandal with the Oakland Police Department.

Through street smarts, perseverance, some good fortune and a generous human spirit, the young girl, Kaira, prevails. She is a survivor.

This novel was occasioned when Leila Mottley, then as a young teenager, came across a story of sexual exploitation by members of the Oakland Police Department. She began to look into other cases of sex workers who had

⁴ Leila Mottley, *Nightcrawling* (New York: Knopf, 2022).

experienced violence at the hands of police departments and never get their stories told.

Mottley began writing this novel when she was seventeen and had it published by Knopf, the source of some of the finest literary fiction on the market. Quite an accomplishment! Keep your eyes on this author; she's going places.

Yes, we celebrate our national birthday somewhat battered and bruised – many left out of the blessings that the well-off and highly educated claim – but I find that America's glass is half-full when we can rejoice in talent like Mottley's.

That a young Black girl can come out of Oakland with such a novel – that's grounds for hope.

That I can turn on the TV and see talented folks who would have never in my parent's day had such opportunity to become anchors on national news programs, that's reason for celebration. I'm thinking of Yamiche Alcindor, host of Washington Week and a featured reporter on many outlets. I'm thinking of Rachel Maddow, José Díaz-Balart, Andrea Mitchell, Chris Jansing, Katy Tur, Stephanie Ruhle, Joy Reid. Openly gay men: Jonathan Capehart and Anderson Cooper. Don't forget weekend hosts: Tiffany Cross and Alicia Menendez, Al Sharpton, Ali Velshi.

None of these folks would have had a prayer for a broadcasting career when I was a young boy or even a lad in college. Back then, if you didn't look like, and sound like, Walter Cronkite, Dan Rather, Roger Mudd or John Chancellor – “fuhgettaboutit.” If fortunate, you'd be the “weather girl” or Black “sports guy.”

Same for the Supreme Court. It's a wonderful milestone and a joyous day to see Katanji Brown Jackson sworn in as an Associate Justice as her beaming husband, Dr. Patrick Jackson, held two Bibles. One of which was the Harlan Bible, given by John Harlan, the first and most fierce defender of Black rights on the Court. Since its donation in 1906, that Bible has been signed by every justice appointed to the Court – a very apt symbol for the first Black woman justice.

America – dinged and bruised, still a work in progress. When you light your sparklers or whatever, we can celebrate the progress we've made and keep our eyes on the prize of so much more remaining to be done.

It's like housework or weeding. Never done.

So, let the watchword of King be our guide. Let us work towards that dawning of a new day. As Dr. King, echoing the poem of Emma Lazarus, said, “No one is free until we are all free.” May this be our prayer. May this be our work. The journey continues – where All really does mean All. Amen.