

Dear friends in Christ



March 27, 2022, Lent 4

“No Slouching”

The Rev. Dr. John C. Forney, St. Francis Episcopal Mission
Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21;
Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

New beginnings are afoot for the Forneys. Our son has become engaged to a most delightful woman with a wedding planned a year or so down the road. When asked if she or her family came from any faith tradition, he answered that they were African Methodist Episcopal. That’s when we learned that Alexis was African-American. Definitely a new beginning.

She’s shared a couple of Christmas holidays with us, and our original assessment is correct. She’s most delightful. This June we go back East to meet her family. Ours compared to hers is rather tiny. Even though she was an only child, she has scads of aunts and uncles. We are definitely looking forward to an expanded and enriched family in the years ahead.

That is the beauty and wonder of new beginnings. That, and the fact they love each other dearly. New beginnings are a delight.

Over the years, they will learn what every couple must learn if they are to stay together. There will be differences of opinion, differences of values, differences of temperament and style. The bit about “the two shall become one flesh” can work splendidly on the physical level. At the beginning. But differences will emerge that need to be worked out. This is something so close to the heart that

it can't be faked. It takes work, not excuses. My parents always urged us to stand tall to the challenge. No slouching! My father hated slouching.

I've worked with more than one alcoholic whose refrain was, well, if you were stuck with my wife, it'd drive you to drink also. If that's the case, all you end up with is a sad, sad "pity party." A party friends and family soon want nothing to do with. You'll be left all by your lonesome to count the cracks on the wall and drink yourself into oblivion. So sad, so sad. Pity Parties are a form of moral and spiritual slouching. Giving up.

I tell divorced persons, that unless they want to go through the same mess with their next partner, they ought to think about getting some professional counseling. Otherwise, the same passivity, the same rage, the same excuses will just as surely devour the next go around.

Or you can get a life. Make a life. No slouching.

The story is told in the Book of Joshua of when the band of Israelite wanderers camped at Gilgal, they celebrated the Passover. Instead of manna, for the first time, they "ate the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. The manna ceased on the day they ate the produce of the land and the Israelites no longer had manna; they ate the crops of the land of Canaan that year."

As bountiful as the land is, as freely as it's blessings flow, at some point the manna ceases and the garden needs tending. It's sweat-of-the-brow time If one is going to reap a harvest. One needs to sow, do the weeding and cultivating.

Jesus tells a story of a young fellow who knows it all. No one can tell him what to do. Chores are for the stupid. "Move out now while you know it all and are the smartest gal or guy in the room." No more of their stupid rules.

So, he demands his share of the family fortune and sets off for a promised land of good luck, women and high times. It all works for a while. It always does. But at some point, reality sets in. Especially when the money's gone and friends begin to evaporate.

Yes, reality sets in. Isn't reality inconvenient? Not much leeway. Not much

slack. The hunger pangs become a big ache in the stomach. Cold, hard sidewalks don't promote much sleep. The loneliness becomes unbearable. It's reality check time. How's it all working out for you? Eventually the manna runs out. Good Times Charley is in his cups.

The excuses are legion. Everybody's against me. The system's rigged. Everyone's corrupt, so why not? Slouching to the max.

As my friend Jim Rhoads says, "How do you know when an addict is lying? His lips are moving." Fact is, there's either recovery or there's not. Excuses are a pretty poor diet. It is, as Yoda says in Star Wars, "Do or Not Do. There is no Try."

Yes, DO or NOT DO. Excuses, resentment and blame are the putrefying dish served up to too many poor Whites in the South. "You may not be much. Your life may be going nowhere, but at least you're better than... [fill in the blank] ..." Jim Crow might momentarily satisfy, but in the end, it's a pretty thin diet. Even for White Supremacists and their neo-Nazi buddies. Eventually, the politics of resentment do not satisfy. No slouching!

I love the story of the newly arrived preacher at a small country church. One day as he is walking down a dirt road, he spies a farmer out in his field -- A most productive field. He hadn't seen this fellow in church yet, so he ambles over to the wooden rail fence and calls out to the man.

"Hi, there. That's a mighty fine farm you have there". Indeed, the corn was as "high as an elephant's eye" and ears were plump and almost ripe for the picking.

The preacher continued, "if I had a farm like that, I'd think I'd want to come to church and let God know how thankful I was."

"Well," drawled the farmer. "I want to tell you; the farm certainly didn't look like this when God had it all to himself."

St. Paul calls us to be "cooperators with God."

The incredible, awful and renewing Grace of God is the moment of awakening. It's Reality-Check Time. If we're going to eat, the garden needs a whole lot of

work. That's what vocation is all about. The beauty of it is that we're needed. And in useful work, we grow into the stature of Christ.

Over two hundred years ago our nation set out upon a new venture. The story is told -- it may be an apocryphal myth -- that as Benjamin Franklin was leaving Independence Hall at the conclusion of the Constitutional Convention he was asked by a passing woman, "What sort of government have you gotten us, Mr. Franklin?" "A republic, Madam, if you can keep it."

Within only a short time, trouble as well as opportunity mounted. The disputes that would eventually tear the nation asunder, culminating in the Civil War, had their inception in what all thought to be the best possible compromise to be had. The best form of government humans could devise. We are still bedeviled by the flaws in that original design. That, and tragic choices early on. Problematic from the inception -- read ***The 1619 Project***.¹

The remnants of a slave constitution linger, almost guaranteeing a fatal imbalance of power which allows for a minority government. With a Senate that gives disproportionate power to a minority, through gerrymandering, race hatred and voter suppression, this anti-democratic arrangement could likely be our undoing. Isn't that what the January 6th Commission is all about? The makings of insurrection. Even during the Civil War, the Stars and Bars did never besmirch and disgrace the halls of the Capitol.

Malevolent forces have seized upon the internal contradictions.

It is time to tend our national garden. To renew our democracy. As in the story of the "Prodigal Son," it's time to wake up. To open our eyes. That is the moment of Awful, Sustaining Grace. That's the moment a drunk comes to the realization that he or she is killing themselves -- when they've hit bottom.

That's the moment the drug addict realizes that he just might not have survived this last overdose. Fentanyl could really kill. It might be the one and same moment that she realizes that there is indeed something to live for. That someone dear loves them. With one fellow, it was the enlightenment that he actually could get a job. There was a purpose to his life. All that is the Grace of

¹ Nikole Hannah-Jones, et al. ed., *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: One World, 2021).

Hard Knocks and Splendid Opportunity. It's what that Hebrew band realized at Gilgal. It's what a son in a far country realized.

The voice of the Holy Spirit is urging diligence, productivity. No slouching. That's what reality-check time is all about. A moment of awful, terrifying Grace. The moment for repentance and turning around.

In Obery Hendricks we have a prophet who does not sugar-coat the choice now before this nation. In his book, ***Christians Against Christianity***, he lays out how a segment of the church has aided and abetted America's descent into our recent moral and political disaster.² Theological slouching to be sure.

Obrey Hendricks, author of numerous books, professor at Columbia University, biblical scholar, and an ordained elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, comes thundering out of our national wilderness like a modern-day Jeremiah. His voice filled with the judgement and promise of God.

His message to America is God's wake-up call. This is his thesis:

"A travesty, that's how I would characterize Christianity in America today. A travesty, a brutal sham, tragic charade, a cynical deceit. Why? Because the loudest voices in American Christianity today – those of right-wing evangelicals—shamelessly spew a putrid stew of religious ignorance and political venom that is poisoning our society, making a mockery of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their rhetoric in the name of their Lord and Savior is mean-spirited, divisive, appallingly devoid of the love for their neighbors and outright demonizes those who do not accept their narrow views—even fellow Christians. Perhaps most shocking is their enthusiastic, almost cultish support for the cruel, hateful policies and pronouncements of President Donald Trump, whose words and deeds more often than not have been the very antithesis of the Christian faith."

Too many Christians have sold their faith for this rancid mass of potage. The stench rises to the heavens.

² Obery M. Hendricks, Jr., *Christians Against Christianity: How Right-Wing Evangelicals are Destroying our Nation and our Faith* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2021).

This autocratic mindset and upchuck theology, hostile to the spirit of democracy, has through the perpetrating of a BIG LIE, sucked in all sorts of complicit malefactors.

Reading this week of Ginny Thomas, wife of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas – the expose` of her emails to Trump’s close advisor Mark Meadows, urging the overthrow of the 2020 election, actually, the overthrow of our government -- this is nothing short of sedition. And Thomas was the only justice voting AGAINST allowing the January 6th Committee’s access to those e-mails. As Dan Rather asks: “What did he know, and when did he know it?”

Our moment of Grace is this Reality-Check Time for America. Is this the path we want to go down as a nation? In nation after nation, this is the path to unfreedom. The path to tyranny.

That we might rouse from our slumber, that we might tend to the flickering dim light of our democracy – that is Hendricks’ plea. Wake up, America. Wake up, Christians.

Obery’s loving Christian parents worked diligently to instill pride and ensure that their children “felt their God-given worth in a society that did not fully value children like us.”³

“No slouching.” That was his mother’s prescription for self-respect. “No slouching, they admonished; stand tall and proud and ‘act like somebody.’ Mumbling was unacceptable; we had to speak up and look the other in the eye.”⁴

No slouching. It’s now up to us. Will we be what Democracy looks like?

This is as good as any wake-up call we can expect -- to the Church, to our nation. It’s all on the line: “No slouching.” God has need of each and every one of us. So does our nation. No slouching! This deafening claxon we now hear is the Awful, Liberating Grace of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Hendricks, op.cit., p. xiv.

⁴ Ibid.