



Dear friends in Christ

July 5, 2020

Independence Day Weekend

“We’re Coming to America”

The Rev. John C. Forney

Deuteronomy 10:17-21; Hebrews 11:8-16; Matthew 5:43-48

Some will remember that “Hot August Night” when Neil Diamond stepped out onto the stage. The orchestra began with a winsome prelude that slowly crescendoed to a pulsing beat. Then began the first strains of that ballad that so aptly celebrates the promise of this nation for millions around the world, “We’re coming to America.” Neil Diamond in an iridescent blue shirt with flashing blue lights spangled about it, and the joyous crowd responding, “Today. Today. Today.” The camera does a slow pan across the audience and comes to rest on the face of an old guy about my age with tears streaming down his face. “Today. Today. Today.”

This is the America I grew up with as a young boy. In school we made Pilgrim hats and the white shoulder coverings those early pioneers wore. We read of that almost deified, mythical Thanksgiving feast. We learned of the colonists rising up and throwing British tea into Boston harbor made up as Indians. And watching over all, Divine Providence.

Yes, actually, historically, some of those things happened. There were a few heroes in all this. But the reality is much more complicated. And not quite as divine.

“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise.”

Unfortunately, that so-called Promised Land has been too much promised. So, with America. Other than the first inhabitants, all the rest of us arrived to find it already taken. And, don't forget, even those first inhabitants drove much of the original wildlife into extinction. All of us have blood on our hands.

Yet by faith, generation after generation, we persevere. The original promise continues to unfold, but we all stand in the need of Grace.

To put it into the passive exonerative voice, “Mistakes were made.” Many. You know them. We're still making them. I wouldn't have been sad at all to see the statue of Andrew Jackson toppled in Lafayette Park in D.C. the other night. You remember that president, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” His expulsion of some sixty thousand Native Americans from the Southeastern United States today would have been considered a war crime. If this bit of our history escapes your mind – maybe you weren't paying attention in your eighth-grade history class. Oh, you say it wasn't in your history book. Well, that's not a surprise. The victors write the history. Don't remember? The Cherokee, Seminole and Choctaw – they remember. Ask one of their people. If you're ready to listen respectfully, with a heart ready to be wounded – maybe one of them will share the story of the “Trail of Tears.” Mistakes were made. In abundance.

So here we are. With the exception of those original inhabitants – and while we all came in different boats – we're all in the same boat now. America is adrift and pestilence stalks the land.

And yet, and yet...by Faith... “They're Coming to America.”

The first came to escape tyranny and the oppression of kings and Church. We didn't believe in the freedom of religion in these scattered colonies much more than the king believed in it in Mother England. Here, we ended up with so many different religious traditions on these shores, we were forced to come to an accommodation. People leaving Europe were exhausted by religious wars. If you can find that in your old, musty history book. These stories are there. Start under, "Thirty Years War." It left some eight million dead. All over whether Jesus was actually in the piece of bread at the altar, or whether he was present in our celebration of his presence in the reality of those who gathered in the memory of his name. Eight million souls gone to wherever over a theological disputation – and a few other things. For sure, politics and nationalism and other stuff were mixed in. As they say, it's complicated.

The genius of this new land is that we have found a better way (not that we always heed it). As Winston Churchill noted about us, "Americans always do the right thing. After they've tried everything else." Eventually, we made progress. A Catholic could be president. Recently, a Jew did almost win the Democratic nomination twice. Jews, Catholics, Protestants serve on the Supreme Court and in Congress with their Muslim brothers and sisters. Don't forget our first black president, EVER. In the twenty-first century, gay, straight and trans, we elect them. And not a few atheists. Yes, God loves atheists, too. Or what part of "ALL" didn't you understand?

By faith we till the soil of this Promised Land. We hold an expansive vision for all.

For those who might be a little squeamish or put off about this last assertion, I refer you to Calvin (also in your history book). Think Presbyterian, Reformed, Congregationalist. "Man does not have the authority to decide whom God will save." Nor does woman. Any of us, flawed as we are, can be an instrument for Good under the power of the One who created the heavens and earth.

"We're Coming to America." Today. Today. "By Faith..."

What is that ineffable quality about this land that others find so compelling? Listen to the stories of those Jews fleeing the shtetls of Russia and Poland in the eighteen-hundreds. Those Orthodox village communities that had known stable communal life for hundreds of years were beset by famine and pogroms. Thousands were killed by czarist mobs and driven off their lands.

“We’re Coming to America.” Today. Today. “By Faith...”

The Forneys, originally French Huguenots fleeing papist mobs in France, first settled in Switzerland and then in Germany. Looking for a better life, we landed in the Port of Philadelphia in 1767 or thereabouts. Between my father’s and mother’s families we are a mix of French, German and English. Throw in a Jewish peddler who married into the family in Iowa and gave my mother’s side the surname, Gross. Her mother was a Howe. Yes, in our lineage Julia Ward Howe – think the first Mother’s Day Proclamation. Also General Howe, the British general who proved so inept as to let George Washington slip through his fingers three times. He was finally sent home back to England. But, apparently, not all the Howes.

We’re coming to America. Sweet Land of Liberty. Today. Today. Today. “By Faith...”

We all came in separate boats, but now we’re all in the same boat. Today, virtually every one reading this -- your family -- came from somewhere. By boat, on foot or, lately, by plane.

As immigrants, our ethic should be formed by Torah values, as explicated in the book of Deuteronomy.

“The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great the mighty, and terrible God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.”

You should love and cleave to God, “...who has done for you these great and terrible things which your eyes have seen.”

This ethic, passed down from Abraham in the Torah to the Prophets, and enshrined in the teachings of Jesus is the heart of who we are created to be as an immigrant nation. This ethic is the cornerstone of the Declaration and Constitution. It was in the mind of Lincoln when he wrote the Emancipation Proclamation. This ethic tore at the hearts of Congress when, shamefacedly, they issued a formal apology to Japanese-Americans interned in concentration camps during WWII.

And what amends will we make to generations of African-Americans who built much of this place? Built the very White House itself and laid out the boundaries of our nation's capital. Look up Benjamin Banneker, surveyor, astronomer, and farmer. He calculated the solar eclipse of 1789 well before other, more famous astronomers. He worked to set those boundary markers.

What reparations will we make to the people of Greenwood? Who built the section of Tulsa, Oklahoma, stormed by white mobs in some of the worst violence our nation has known? What reparations? "Black Wall Street" burnt to the ground, the pride of generations of Tulsa's Black citizens? They're still waiting for an answer.

What amends will we make to the First Nations people from whom we stole Mt. Rushmore and so much more? Impoverished on neglected reservations.

The miracle is that we have survived thus far and somehow managed to keep the country together after some fashion.

This ethic reverberates in the agonized plea of Rodney King, "...can we all JUST get along? Can we get along?"

So, listen up, Sweet Land of Liberty, we're at a new beginning. As M.L. King wrote, "...tomorrow is today."

"By Faith..."

Read the opinion section by Caroline Randall Williams, "You want a Confederate Monument? My body is a Confederate Monument. The black

people I came from were raped by the white people I came from. Who dares to tell me to celebrate them?"¹

Yes, read it. The mere fact that such a searing story could be printed at all is evidence that God has graced this land. True greatness begins with truth-telling, repentance. And at some point, hopefully, absolution. Absolution, not ours to demand, but a mark of God's grace that grows out of honest, heartfelt conversation with those harmed. Freely offered, not ours to demand. Ultimately, a gift of God's Grace.

"Among the apologists for the Southern cause and for its monuments, there are those who dismiss the hardships of the past. They imagine a world of benevolent masters, and speak with misty eyes of gentility and honor and the land. They deny plantation rape, or explain it away, or question the degree of frequency with which it occurred."

"To those people it is my privilege to say, ***I am the proof***. I am proof that whatever else the South might have been, or might believe itself to be, it was and is a space whose prosperity and sense of romance and nostalgia were built upon the grievous exploitation of black life."²

The fact that Ms. Williams's story could even be told -- and read -- and hopefully absorbed with empathy by a white audience, is a mark of God's grace. Freedom begins with truthful story telling. She, and all who have survived such a shameful legacy -- they are the true heroes of the South. They are its righteous legacy. So, also with those of the southern branch of the Forney family."

If America is ever to be Great Again," it would only be when we disenthral ourselves of our made-up, high school sanitized history. With the Rev. Al Sharpton, we must acknowledge that any greatness will only begin when we honestly ask, "Great for whom?" Great for whom? And prayerfully listen for an answer. The Spirit will speak to an open and contrite heart.

¹ Caroline Randall Williams, *New York Times*, "Sunday Review," June 28, 2020., p. 4.

² Ibid.

Any greatness will begin with an honest assessment of who we are and from where we have traveled. As my mother always said, “Handsome is as handsome does.” I think I now know what she meant.

“By Faith Abraham...” By Faith, each one of us embarks on a new journey, sojourners in a land every bit as strange and as foreign as it was to those first people who crossed the Bearing Strait eons ago. Every bit as foreign as it was to those first Pilgrims. As it was to those who disembarked from fetid slave ships. Every bit as foreign as were the streets of New York that opened to hundreds of Suffragette women marching for their personhood to be acknowledged at the ballot box. Every bit as foreign as to those who on Bloody Sunday crossed the Edmund Pettis Bridge -- named after a Grand Dragon of the KKK. Every bit as foreign as America now is to all of us in this new era of #BlackLivesMatter, COVID-19 lockdown, and the beginning of an economic collapse unlike any since the Great Depression. “By Faith...”

“By Faith...” Might we be receptive on this July 4th to the stirring of God’s Holy Spirit. Indeed, “The times, they are a changing.” Might this nation embrace this fresh opportunity to live out its creeds and promises. A new birth of common purpose.

“By Faith....” let each take hold of the opportunity to begin anew. Then, and only then, do we embark on a journey towards greatness – a destination never reached, but approached from afar with starry eyes.

“By Faith...” We’re still Coming to America. Today. Today. Today.

Amen.