

Dear friends in Christ



St. Francis Episcopal Mission Outreach

Rev. Dr. John C. Forney
Fourth of July, 2021

“We Are Family”

Deuteronomy 10:17-21; Psalm 145;
Letter from a Birmingham Jail by M.L. King; Matthew 5:43-48

In a moment, as time goes, our nation came under a new form of government and new management upon the ratification of the Constitution of the United States of America.

When Benjamin Franklin was returning from the last meeting of the Continental Congress after the drafting of the Constitution, a passing woman called out, “Mr. Franklin, what sort of a government have you given us?” “A republic, madam, if you can keep it.”

If you can keep it. Of my American family, I’m having some serious doubts lately.

“We are Family,” the lyrics go. “We are Family” -- but how far dysfunctional? How far gone down the rabbit hole have we Americans gone? To the point where we just might catch the rabbit.

Alice and Wonderland seems less and less like a tale and more and more a sick American joke. On us.

“We are family
I got all my sisters with me
We are family
Get up everybody and sing”¹

I seem to be having a little trouble of late getting it out. Seems like all the red stripes have badly faded and not a few stars are missing from that field of blue. It’s a bit tattered -- both flag and my American family. Don’t you think?

To shift the metaphor -- as I sit transfixed by the enormity of the pile of rubble which used to be a Florida condominium, I have serious doubts as to whether we can keep the bequest of those men who gathered at Independence Hall on July 4, 1776.

My neighbor just put out his flag in honor of the upcoming holiday. I’m not so sure. Living through the headlines this week, I’m not in much of a celebratory mood. That huge pile of rubble in Florida seems emblematic of where we are as a country.

The Corona virus continues to ravage and stress us beyond endurance. Months of lockdown have taken a terrible toll on us all. This past week Los Angeles authorities detained a woman after her three dead children were discovered at their home.

Riverside County supervisors are launching a task force to uncover the roots of a rise in fentanyl fatalities, the cause of 41% of all drug overdose deaths in that county. A dear friend recently lost his granddaughter to street drugs laced with fentanyl. America, we’re coming apart at the seams.

In the midst of this calamity, some deride, some flout the science. We are so divided that we now have two political parties living in two different universes. Polls apart. One tribe believes in the precautions science recommends. The other intentionally refuses to heed any advice for caution.

¹ Nile Rodgers and Bernard Edwards, Atlantic Records, April, 1978.

One of our stellar congresswomen tweets that the problems of COVID-19 will simply disappear if we just “turn off CNN and vote Republican.”² Another congress critter willfully disobeys protocol and refuses to wear a mask for his flight back to Texas.³

Oh, and this week it was 121 degrees Fahrenheit in Canada. Canada, of all places! The ground temperature this past week was 118 degrees above the Arctic Circle in Siberia! Portland, Oregon clocked in at 115 degrees. Talk about a “Tropical Heat Wave!” Where is Peggy Lee? Time for another verse of “Fever.”

To top it off, our Tuesday bike group can’t take the usual route to our favorite breakfast place in Upland. One of our finer citizens recently torched the wooden bridge spanning the flood control channel several miles from our starting point.

So, I’m not sure about the flag, but I am about to head to the store to buy some chicken and brauts. Going to get the fixings for our famous Forney potato salad. The beer’s getting cold in the fridge. And we have a new bag of charcoal ready for the grill.

We are not left without guidance and comfort – though one friend’s tee shirt reads, “My excuse is that I was left without supervision.” But comfort and guidance, yes, indeed.

There is other breaking news. Words as old as ancient scripture and as timely as the latest headlines. “You have heard that it was said...” With this simple introduction, Jesus lays out the way beyond daily distress. “But I say to you...” There is a path forward. A path that leads to wholeness, renewal and abundance.

² Lee Moran, “GOP Rep. Lauren Boebert Ridiculous Way To Tackle Delta COVID-19 Variant,” Huffpost, July 1, 2021.

³ Michael Biesecker, “GOP congressman flouts mask rules on airline flight to Texas,” Associated Press, July 1, 2021.

From a modern translation, *The Message*, here is a contemporary rendition of these familiar words from Matthew.⁴

“You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and it’s unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the supple moves of prayer, for then you are working out your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. God gives the best – the sun to warm and the rain to nourish – to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that”

“In a word, what I’m saying is, Grow up. You’re kingdom subjects. Now act like it.”

Pretty hard to do. But there it is, folks. A new way of walking. This is an ethic that tastes of eternity.

As Dr. King reminds us in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail, “There was a time when the church was powerful. It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society...They went on with the conviction that they were ‘a colony of heaven...’

In a word, they lived out the new ethic of the Jesus Movement. They were the message in deed and action. They were a tribe of all sorts attracting those fleeing from the dissolution of the day. And day by day, God added to their numbers. These were not perfect people. Not by a long shot. But they remembered their roots as sojourners who had come out of enslavement and captivity to the standards of the world. They remembered their heritage. Their Morning Star was the One who “executes justice for the fatherless, the motherless, and the widow, and

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs, CO: Nav Press, 1993), 1099-1100.

loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner therefore; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.”

We’re invited to a community of care. Care for one another, the stranger, and for this beautiful earth, our “island home,” drifting through the vast sea of stars and galaxies.

In light of these Gospel Words, I do take heart. There are those in our midst who in this banal culture of deceit and duplicity live them out. They are, in fact the Gospel. In them I find inspiration.

George Packer, in his new book, *Last Best Hope* (Get it. Read it.)⁵ He tells the last day of work, before resignation, of Nurse Ashley Bartholomew, coming off shift in the COVID intensive care unit.

She entered the room of a patient watching the TV coverage of the critical need of morgue trailers in El Paso, Texas. “Fake news,” the patient said. “I don’t think COVID is really more than a flu.”

“Now you think differently, though?” Bartholomew asked, unsure what he meant.”

“No, the same,’ the patient said. ‘I should just take vitamins for my immune system. They’re making it a big deal.”

“The nurse didn’t know that to say. She was wrapped in protective gear. The ICU was overflowing. All around her were the sick and dying. At the end of her shift she was going to resign her job out of sheer exhaustion. Ordinarily she never spoke about other patients to one in her care, but now something made her do it.”

“To be honest, this is my last shift,’ the nurse said. ‘you’re the only patient of twenty-five that has been able to speak to me today, or is even aware I’m here.”

“Really?’ The patient remained skeptical. He asked if many of her patients had died. She told him that she’d given CPR to more of them in the past two weeks than throughout her ten years as a nurse.”

⁵ George Packer, *Last Best Hope: America in Crisis and Renewal*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), 30-31.

“The man’s tone changed, and he said he was sorry. The nurse began to cry. Tears ran down under her glasses, her mask, her respirator, and her face shield, onto her gown. She apologized for losing her composure.

“As she brought the man out of the ICU to a unit with a lower level of care, they passed some of the patients she’d told him about. Later, while they were waiting for another nurse, the man said, ‘Thank you for telling me what you told me. I saw a lot of the other ones when you were wheeling me out of the ICU. It’s much more than a flu. I was mistaken.’”

“Bartholomew thanked him and hoped for his total recovery.

“I will tell everyone who denies how bad this is about my experiences,’ he said.”

“One mind changed – but this patient in intensive care had to hear the truth from a devastated nurse who summoned the will to make him think about others”

Remember you were strangers in the land of COVID. Remember those who continue to bear witness. Remember the stout hearted “critical” workers of great patience and care who summon up the courage to bear witness to what they daily endure. They are the true blessing of this nation. They hold the promise of the Fourth of July. Nurses like Ashley Bartholomew. She gets the ethic of the Jesus Movement.

I lift up another Fourth of July hero, author Bill McKibben. Though temperatures climb to 115, 120 degrees, he gives witness to the truth of climate science. In his piece, “A Very Hot Year,” Bill, is unsparing in his warning.⁶

“We now know that government and university labs were not the only ones predicting the climatic future: over the last five years, great investigative reporting...unearthed the large-scale investigations carried out in the 1980s by oil companies. Exxon, for instance, got the problem right: one of the graphs their researchers produced predicted with uncanny accuracy what the temperature and carbon dioxide

⁶ Bill McKibben, “A Very Hot Year,” *New York Review of Books*, March 12, 2020.

concentrations would be in 2019. That this knowledge did not stop the industry from its all-out decades-long war to prevent change is a fact...”⁷

Hey, Exxon man, just how hot is too hot? Dust bowl hot? California and New Mexico firestorm hot? Whata you think? Should we go for 140 degrees next year? Or is it better business to just pay off your political puppets to ignore the melting highways? Cheaper, for sure.

Thank God for Bill McKibben and those who early on sounded the warning like James Hansen.⁸ Nurse Ashley Bartholomew – all these I joyfully claim. Jesus says I have a bit of work to do with some of the others.

These are the sort I claim as part of my American Family – those putting Gospel Live into our common life. This is the heritage I can celebrate and give thanks for this coming Fourth. We are family.

Break out the potato salad and toss back a brewski. Fire up the grill. I’ll see if I can find my flag. Amen.

⁷Naomi Oreskes, Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010).

⁸James Hansen, *Storms of my Grandchildren: The Truth About the Coming Climate Catastrophe and Our Last Chance to Save Humanity* (New York: Bloomsbury).