

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Our Freedom

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

July 4, 2021

When I am weak, then I am strong... In the span of a few paragraphs in 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul continues a theme that runs through most of the letters of his writings in the New Testament; he speaks candidly of his strengths and weaknesses, elations and sufferings, highs and lows. The youth sometime go around the circle do this same sort of thing, telling about their weeks by sharing highs and lows, sweet and sour.

Paul; says: I was in elation in the mystery of the highest of heavens, and I've been dragged down to the depths of the human suffering. I've been on top of the world and I've been on the business end of a whipping rod. In this unforgettable passage, the Apostle says, I will not boast of my strengths, but I will of my weakness because that is where I learned God's strength becomes perfected.

Years ago, the band Coldplay, or off brand U2, sang a song about highs and lows.

*I used to rule the world
Seas would rise when I gave the word.
Now in the morning, I sleep alone,
Sweep the streets I used to own*

*One minute I held the key,
Next the walls were closed on me,
And I discovered that my castles stand
Upon pillars of salt and pillars of sand*

The song was called Viva La Vida which means live life. Anyone who's ever lived life has likely had highs and some lows, sweets and some sour. It's part of life. It's all part of life.

It's part of a nation's life, too. Highs and lows. Strengths and weaknesses. History to boast and history to confess. Isn't this true of our history as a nation? I acknowledge 4th of July isn't the normal day to be thoughtful, even confessional, about our nation's history. It's more of a day to wonderfully obnoxiously puff out chests and ooh and ahh at fireworks and eat hot dogs and I'm in for all of it.

Yet, we realize we respond to a higher calling when we honor July 4th as the capstone Sunday in a season of Sundays called a Season of Justice and Peace. How do Christians live out our vocation as ministers of reconciliation, as the church in America, in the particular context of American *past*, which includes slavery and systematic racism and the church's complicity in it? How can we be ministers of reconciliation in the context of the American *present*, including last summer's severe racial trauma? And how do we live our ministry in the context of America's *future*—what will it be? What can it be? What is our place in it?

This Season spans June 19th to July 4th, the space between Juneteenth and Independence Day. The hope isn't just that the season occupies the empty space on the calendar, but that it holds these two together.

These two holidays are now both national federal holidays. As of this year, just a few weeks ago, June 19th, Juneteenth, which celebrates the end of slavery, joined July 4th as a national holiday. Oddly in the eyes of some, insightfully in the eyes of others, Juneteenth also joined July 4th as an Independence Day. Did you pick up on that? The holiday was established by congress and signed by the president as officially Juneteenth National Independence Day.

That prompted at least one white congressman from Kentucky to grumble, understandably in a way, that you can't have two Independence Days on the calendar. In his view, July 4th should be Independence Day and Juneteenth something else, something less. "Naming this day (Juneteenth) National Independence Day will create confusion and push Americans to pick one of those two days as their Independence Day based on their racial identity," he said on the House floor. Well, was he right?

A commentary published by an African American scholar in Chicago said the same thing in a way—you can't have 2 Independence Days so we should pick one and not the other. In his view, Juneteenth is the true Independence Day. The other, today, is empty, an undercooked hot dog, or a firecracker that ends with a whimper and not a bang.

Like many Christians and many pastors, I have a pretty ambivalent view of national holidays in church life. Some churches wrap the cross in the flag way too much for my theology of church and understanding of Jesus. Yet, here we are, reflecting on Christian life in America, and it seems right. It seems important. Christian life doesn't exist in a social vacuum or history museum, and we say all the time we want to live our faith in here and out there and in the spaces in between. What I mean to say is we recognize we have some work to do, and there is a very complicated context in which to do the work. In here (our hearts), in here (in the church), and out there, in our relationships, in our structures, in the stories we tell of the past, and in the life we make together in the days ahead.

So where does this lead? Maybe you don't stay up nights worrying about this, but it's either an impossible mess or a transformative moment. Do we have July 4 and not June 19 or vice versa? Or do we have July 4th the celebration of the Revolutionary War for white America and June 19th the celebration of the end of slavery for Black America? Is that where we're headed? It may be where we've already been. Just most of us, I mean most white Americans, didn't realize it. I didn't.

We find a guide for this road from a long time ago in a very different era. In 1852, Frederick Douglass gave to a speech hosted by a ladies group of abolitionists in upstate New York. In attendance were politicians including President Millard Fillmore. Look at this moment as an audaciously American moment. For over an hour some of the most powerful people in the country sat and listened to an escaped slave speak to them and preach to them. Douglass was born in Maryland. He never knew his father, was separated from his mother, forcibly, as a young child. He ran away and successfully escaped at age 21 and became one of the finest

orators in our nation's history. At a July 4th celebration in 1852, he gave the speech in which he, at length, praises the founders of this nation, their ideals, courage, and accomplishments. I would like to quote him at length:

“Fellow Citizens, I am not wanting in respect for the fathers of this republic. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men. They were great men too — great enough to give fame to a great age. It does not often happen to a nation to raise, at one time, such a number of truly great men. The point from which I am compelled to view them is not, certainly, the most favorable; and yet I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration. They were statesmen, patriots and heroes, and for the good they did and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory.

“They loved their country better than their own private interests; and, though this is not the highest form of human excellence, all will concede that it is a rare virtue, and that when it is exhibited, it ought to command respect. He who will, intelligently, lay down his life for his country, is a man whom it is not in human nature to despise. Your fathers staked their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor on the cause of their country. In their admiration of liberty, they lost sight of all other interests.”

You may have noticed that all the while Douglass was praising the American founders, he kept saying “your” --*your* nation, *your* founders. His audience must have picked up on that. Not our founders, our ideals, but yours. As a black man, as a former slave in an era of slavery, he was looking from the outside in on celebrations of freedom. But it was from that perspective that he could help them see from the inside out. Then he asked a question they probably hadn't thought much about even in their enlightened abolitionist intentions. It's one thing to do good; it's another to have empathy toward the other that seeks to understand the world from their life perspective. Doing good can change something for someone else. Having empathy changes something in you in relationship with someone else. What, Douglass asked rhetorically, is your 4th of July to an enslaved man?

For those in any generation who have ears to hear, his answer is a piercing thorn in the flesh of American self-congratulation. He answered his own question like the prophet Amos. It took just as much courage to say and takes just as much to hear. But let us hear his words.

“What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy — a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.”

Now perhaps there is limited value in preaching over 170 years later, but as we've noted, history is not in the past. History continues through the present. The past is not just past, and it is certainly not dead. The vestiges of the history that we live linger on, and the fights about whether we should be honest about that history are front and center. Here in 1852 is a black man standing before a white audience on the 4th of July saying, "The 4th of July is yours not mine." A former slave standing before a free audience in a time when slave hunters could find you anywhere and take you back South where you came from.

What courage he had. I'm not sure which takes more courage: to stand there as he did, or to be able to find something praiseworthy in the founders whose nation enslaved your grandma and your momma and your daddy and you, or to speak this kind of vulnerable truth to people who were more in the mood to be congratulated for their liberated Northern sensibilities rather than confronted with their own complicity in the suffering of others.

Courage. Grace. Strength.

The Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Was not God's power made known in Douglass' weakness that day? Certainly. The historical question is, could God's power be made known in a nation whose national weakness, its original sin, had yet to be fully reckoned in 1852. The question for now is whether we can walk toward a future that reckons honestly, with courage and humility, with the past and with the present. Reckoning that racism isn't a historical footnote in the great American novel; it's the ink with which the story is written. What story generations from now is yet to be told of us all?

There are many chapters in this book that are yet to be written. Douglass could see what it would take for a nation rooted in high ideals and devastating racism to come to reckoning. Can we? Do we have the courage to be as truthful with ourselves, about our weaknesses? Can we trust God's grace to write a new story in us, a people leading the way of justice, reconciliation, peace, even love?

I have hope. I have great hope.

I was told recently about one of your grandchildren, 8 years old, who is a budding history buff who occasionally gets his history mixed up a little as we do when we're 8 or 48, I'm sure. Recently, he'd been thinking about things. You could see it on his furrowed brow and hear it in his voice. He said to his grandpa, "Grandpa, when we won the Revolutionary War, we weren't really free."

"What do you mean," Grandpa asked, thinking this was a moment to straighten him out of some confusion he had about history.

"We weren't free. We were *free-ish*?"

Grandpa leaned in, "How so?"

That eight year old boy said one word: "Slavery"

I felt chills when I heard that story. If an 8-year-old great grandson of a legitimate WWII hero can understand that in history, the we can have eyes for the present. You know the key word in his little history lesson? *We*. Not they. Not some of them. We weren't yet free.

This was the whole point of Frederick Douglass' speech 170 years ago and of Wendel Berry's reflections we heard a couple weeks ago and of Kathryn's encouragement to us last Sunday. *We*. We're in this together. As long as slavery existed, we were all caught in the net. As long as we don't shed the old sin which still clings to our divided lives, we are still not running the race set before us, and we are still not yet free. Maybe *free-ish*.

Americans thrive on our power. It's kind of our thing. It's our brand. But God's grace isn't known among a people obsessed with protecting their power through violence, oppression, racist attitudes, or racist structures. God's grace is perfected in persons and among a people who acknowledge their weaknesses, who confess their sins, who ask for divine help, who show humility, and who listen to the wisdom of others.

There aren't parades or fireworks for this kind of work. But there is a table: broken bread, poured wine, and the presence of the crucified and risen Christ.

And there is grace being perfected in you. And that, alone is our hope.

Let the church arise and lead the way. Let us bless this nation, "America, America, may God shed his grace on thee and crown your good with **brotherhood**, from sea to shining sea."

Then, we shall be free, and you shall be beautiful.
Amen.