

“The Harmonies of Liberty”

July 2, 2023

Isaiah 58:6-11

Colossians 3:12-14

For those who seek more than flags and fireworks between now and the Fourth of July, our celebration of Independence Day has become somewhat fraught in recent years as we recognize our complex history as a nation that includes captors and captives, liberators and the liberated, oppressors and those who rose up against oppression.

Maybe the problem has been with us much longer. After all, in 1854, Frederick Douglass famously asked: “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.”

This America, we sing, is a “Sweet land of liberty”—and the majority in our nation now confess what a minority knew for so long: that originally such liberty was intended for only a few.

How do we, in all our diversity, join together in a single song?

Of course, the writers and the signers of the Declaration of Independence thought they were attesting to that which needed no demonstration, no proof, no explanation “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

These truths were plainly visible, self-evident: equality, rights that cannot be taken away. Anyone could see these realities.

And in the draft list of the causes which impelled the Continental Congress to separate from Great Britain, Thomas Jefferson included the charge that the King “has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare,” he concluded, “is the warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain.”

Those words didn’t make it into the Declaration signed on July 4, 1776. Jefferson would later blame the delegates from South Carolina and Georgia for the removal of that complaint against the King. But he did not blame them alone. He also faulted the northern delegates who represented merchants who at that time were themselves involved in the Transatlantic slave trade.

To many, it was not self-evident that *all* men were created equal or that they had an unalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—and so as this new nation, *our* nation, emerged, it dragged along with it the slave trade in which both the North and the South were complicit.

Nor was it self-evident that women, and poor people, and indentured servants were also endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, as they, too, were variously denied life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Even with its fundamental sin of omission, the Declaration of Independence gave a subversive vision for this nation. It gives us an identity as an American people to guide us in the way we might go if we so choose.

That vision was not fully grasped by everyone in 1776—not even by the Declaration’s primary author, the enslaver, Thomas Jefferson. And because of objections from the North and the South, that vision was not given full expression.

At the time Abigail Adams also warned: “Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could.”

The tension between vision and reality ultimately led us into a great Civil War. When Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, African Americans began to enlist in the Union Army, fulfilling the hope of Frederick Douglass, who had been pressuring Lincoln to allow their service. The war turned from an effort to preserve the Union into a moral crusade to eliminate the enslavement of people in the United States.

There are consequences when people seek to be faithful. We struggle against principalities and powers. And those powers will not be defeated without a great struggle.

Of the 73,000 Iowans who served in the Union Army, 13,000 died. In some sense, we have all—Black and White—come to this day “treading our feet,” as we sang, “through the blood of the slaughtered.”

That song, so beloved by so many of all backgrounds, helps me this year with its opening words: “Lift every voice and sing, til earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty.”

The harmonies of liberty.

That phrase called me to find out a little more about music theory. And I know that many of you know far more about this than I do.

I found out that in popular and jazz harmony, chords are named by their root plus various terms and characters indicating their qualities. In many types of music, notably baroque, romantic, modern, and jazz, chords are often augmented with “tensions.” A tension is an additional chord member that creates a relatively dissonant interval in relation to the bass.

Typically, a dissonant chord—a chord with tension--resolves to a consonant chord.

Harmonization usually sounds pleasant to the ear when there is a balance between consonance and dissonance. Simply put, this occurs when there is a balance between "tense" and "relaxed" moments. Dissonance is an important part of harmony.

So, Paul McCartney could tell us and ask us: “Ebony and ivory live together in perfect harmony, side by side on my piano keyboard, O Lord, why can’t we?”

Liberty is not a melody—one line sung in unison by all: captors and captives, liberators and the liberated, oppressors and those who rose up against oppression. It is not a single common story. Liberty contains many harmonies—individual sounds and diverse histories joined together into a whole as they interact with each other.

In his book, *This Is the Voice*, John Colapinto, suggests that conversation—*all conversation*—“is conducted, like a piece of music... Like jazz musicians taking a solo, speakers can improvise freely in terms of content (that is they can say whatever they want and at whatever length), but

only within a predetermined and mutually agreed upon pitch, or musical ‘key.’” “Conversation,” he suggests, “...is a form of singing, a duet.”

We are invited, we are *called* to hear what we don’t want to hear, to speak what we are afraid to speak.

The harmonies of liberty that we seek, that we *need* are found as more people gain their voices, as more people listen to one another.

It is, as Paul suggests, the culmination of love that speaks honestly, that listens openly, growing out of a necessary forgiveness.

Rather than a land of *liberty*, perhaps we have instead a land of the *promise* of liberty. And once such a promise is made, people of good will struggle to make sure that the promise is kept. It is a promise that is kept as we harmonize together.

Enough people heard the promise of the equality of all people that the words of the Declaration of Independence have continued to prod and challenge, continued to inspire and encourage us in our evolving struggle for freedom and equality.

We fought a Civil War, we marched for women’s suffrage, we faced jail and injustice and violence and murder, we debated and voted and petitioned and protested out of the faith that is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

It seems fitting, then that on this weekend when we celebrate freedom, we are also invited to be nourished with bread and cup at the Lord’s Table. At this table we are reminded of the great freedom in which the life of Jesus was broken and poured out for us and for all people—so that we might be fully alive in our love for others. At this table we receive the freedom of the spirit that comes from forgiveness and Christ’s presence with us

From this table of freedom, we are sent out again into our ordinary days. From this table we are sent to live in the extraordinary freedom of the gospel.

And each day, in all that we do, let us celebrate the freedom that we have in Christ, the freedom that allows us to pursue all other freedoms and to create beautiful harmonies as we work to make them possible for all people.