

“To Look for America”

July 4, 2021

Isaiah 58:2-11

Luke 15:1-10

As this Fourth of July weekend approached, I was thinking of those wistful words of the old Simon and Garfunkel song:

“Kathy, I'm lost”, I said, though I knew she was sleeping
I'm empty and aching and I don't know why
Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike
They've all come to look for America

Americans headed out on the roads in great, maybe record, numbers this weekend. With the pandemic seeming to let up, we've all come to look for America once more—and perhaps finding again that we are lost, or feeling again that our nation is lost.

On this Fourth of July morning, we listened as Jesus tells two stories of people who search diligently. They confirm what he said at another time: “Those who seek, find.”

Maybe so.

But it's not always that straightforward.

So let me start with this story:

During this time with our church building closed, we had occasional problems with the alarm on our elevator. It wasn't a major issue and it has been resolved.

From time to time—the alarm would start beeping for no discernable reason. No one had been using the elevator and someone made sure that the problem was fixed each time.

During the most recent occurrence, a few of us were looking for the keys to reset the elevator. There are two round keyholes of two different sizes—so we were looking for two different keys. We found one where we thought it would be—in the desk drawer in the church office.

But we couldn't find the second key. We have a couple of containers filled with various keys. We went through them—a couple of times—and didn't find the key. We looked in the elevator control room—and it wasn't there. We looked in obscure places and in obvious places—no key. We didn't take the biblical approach and light a lamp and sweep the building, but we couldn't find the key.

After a few days, I was talking with Sharyn Reitz about some other issues. She was out of state at the time, but I told her about the key situation because Sharyn knows the whereabouts of all sorts of things. “Oh,” she said, “We don't have that key. That other keyhole is for a key that the fire department has.”

As we were laughing about our misguided and ill-fated search, Sharyn added, “There's probably a sermon somewhere in all of this.”

As I said, Sharyn knows the whereabouts of many things. And after a little searching of my own, I found the sermon that Sharyn thought was there—or at least one of them. And my good fortune was that it is an Independence Day sermon!

It's about the ongoing and sometimes desperate search for America that is our nation's project.

After the Constitution was written, Elizabeth Willing Powell asked Benjamin Franklin, "What have we got, a monarchy or a republic?" Franklin famously answered: "A republic, if you can keep it."

At various times, when it seems uncertain as to whether or not we *can* keep it, at times such as our own, we search again for the America that is so elusive. We search for the America we *know* must be out there, but we're just not finding it.

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

Frederick Douglass searingly asked in his well-known words of July 5, 1852: "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."

Looking for America revealed atrocities and oppression, not sweetness.

And yet, even on that day, Douglass was able to conclude: "...notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented, of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery. 'The arm of the Lord is not shortened,' and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from 'the Declaration of Independence,' the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age."

The "great principles" that Douglass and others have found in the Declaration of Independence provide something as important as the rule of law. Even with its fundamental sin of omission, the Declaration provides the vision for us as a nation. It gives us an identity as an American people to guide us in the way we might go if we so choose. It is a map, if imperfect and unfinished, that tells us where we might look for America.

Rather than a land of *liberty*, perhaps we find 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.

So, Martin Luther King, Jr., on that hot August day, spoke of his hope that one day the places in this America "sweltering with the heat of oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice." Such a hope, such a faith would empower people, King said, "to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. This will be the day, he concluded, when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning: My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing," adding, "And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true."

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.

This past week once again showed us that this work, and our search for America, is not finished.

The Supreme Court let stand Arizona laws requiring election officials to discard ballots cast in the wrong precincts and prohibiting campaign workers, community activists and others from collecting ballots. This will weaken Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, the most important part of the law left standing after the court's 2013 decision gutting Section 5 of the law.

E.J. Dionne noted that "In an eloquent dissent rooted in fact, history and a respect for Congress's right to legislate under the 15th Amendment, Justice Elena Kagan demolished the majority's crabbed view of democracy. She noted that the Voting Rights Act "confronted one of this country's most enduring wrongs" and "pledged to give every American, of every race, an equal chance to participate in our democracy."¹

The more people who exercise their right to vote, the better it is for our nation. As a congregation we worked with the Johnson County Interfaith Coalition before the last election to increase voter turnout. Now, the Interfaith Coalition has received a substantial grant to do voter registration and canvassing in Johnson County. They will be able to hire a canvassing coordinator and pay folks to do canvassing in lower income and neighborhoods of people of color.

There's more information about this in the bulletin. I encourage you to read it and be a part of this effort as we continue to search for America.

We still haven't found what we're looking for, but we keep looking.

And, yes, it might be that "America"—like that elevator key—just isn't there to be found. It might be that "America" is there to be *made* in each new year, each new generation. The promise of America is that it is a place where we can continue to look and to work and to build.

So let us return to those two parables of Jesus about seeking for what is lost. A shepherd leaves ninety-nine sheep in the wilderness to search for one that is lost. A woman sweeps her house and searches carefully to find a missing silver coin.

When the shepherd finds the sheep, he calls the community to rejoice with him.

When the woman finds the coin, she calls the community to rejoice with her.

When the lost is found, all the people are invited to celebrate.

We long for something like this—the rejoicing, the celebrating when we find what we are looking for.

Now, Jesus goes on to say that this is something like the heavenly rejoicing when one person repents.

Searching, real searching, leads us to look in all sorts of places, with all sorts of people. We look in one place and then we repent—that is, we turn in a new direction because the old path wasn't working. We look someplace else.

There is more than one key—indeed each of us holds a key. This is especially important to remember now because it often does feel like an emergency. People on all sides tells us that we should fear the end of democracy, of America as we know. The alarms are sounding! Call the fire department!

We are united in our suspicion of one another.

We're empty and aching and we don't know why.

We've all come to look for America. Let us find ways to overcome our suspicion and continue the search together.

Let us pray: Eternal God, ruler of all people of the earth,
forgive, we pray, our shortcomings as a nation;
illumine our hearts to seek and love truth;
give wisdom to our leaders and steadfastness to our people;
lead us in the ongoing task of making a nation of peace,
whose foundations are mercy, justice, and goodwill; through Jesus Christ. Amen.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/07/01/oligarchy-day-supreme-court/?itid=hp_opinions