

5th of July

I'm diverting from the lectionary today on what you might call a point of personal privilege. When I realized that this Sunday was going to be the 5th of July, I just couldn't help myself. You see, the date of July 5th has been significant to me for about 30 years now. I want to tell you a little about that this morning as well as reflecting a bit on a conversation I had this past Monday and on the more widely significant date of yesterday, the 4th of July. All that, plus the scripture passages I just read to you and a few more to boot. It really does all connect, believe it or not.

When I was an undergrad at Rice University, the university's main theatre production group, the Rice Players, had a strong reputation in the community as a good place to see interesting, cutting-edge scripts; a reputation built by the Rice Players' director and Rice's only faculty member in theatre, Sandy Havens. Even though I came to Rice as a psychology major, I'd been a hotshot actor in high school and I soon found myself spending every available moment at Hamman Hall, where the Players performed and had their props, set and costume shops and Sandy's office. In the spring of my sophomore year, I had my first lead role with the Players, as Ken Talley in Lanford Wilson's newest play, "5th of July." The role of Ken had been originated by William Hurt at the off-Broadway Circle Rep in New York. You may remember Hurt from a string of notable movies in the early 80s – "Body Heat," "The Big Chill," "Kiss of the Spider Woman," "Broadcast News." The role of Ken was a demanding one. The character is a Vietnam veteran who has lost both legs in combat and the play requires the actor to accurately portray a man who's spent years trying with mixed success to deal with prostheses. I spent weeks that spring working with real double amputees and their doctors at the Texas Medical Center across the street from our campus and one of my proudest moments as an actor came on the night that some of those brave men came to our performance and praised my physical work as accurate and believable. Incidentally, after our production, Wilson made revisions to the script, which had not been a hit at Circle Rep, and the new script was mounted on Broadway with Christopher Reeve, a.k.a. Superman, as Ken. That production was enough of a hit that it was then remounted for television with Richard Thomas (better known as "John-Boy" Walton) as Ken. The Rice Players production was sufficiently important in the lives of its cast that for years many of us would make it a point to call each other on July 5th, to catch up and to reminisce.

But there are reasons beyond nostalgia which call that script to my mind today. As one might suspect with a play which features a war-shattered Vietnam vet as protagonist and sets itself on the day after the anniversary of American Independence, the play carries themes of both independence and interdependence, of pride in one's home country and place and of the rejection of country and place. As a nineteen-year old actor with four perfectly serviceable limbs and no physical disabilities beyond a pair of strong eyeglasses, I had no direct personal reference for Ken's experience as an amputee. Nor was I a decorated war veteran, although I had had the experience of being shot at, which is a story for another time. But I understood his ambivalence about patriotism and small town Missouri quite well. As an American child in England for three and a half years, I had felt the heightened and measured patriotism of the expatriate – fiercely proud of my own country, yet grateful for the welcome of my hosts. I remember the seriousness with which I set about learning the words to "The Star-Spangled Banner" as a child, so that I could sing my national anthem when I returned to the States and the pride I felt in American achievements, such as the Apollo program and Billie Jean King's dominance at Wimbledon. But I also remember being quietly embarrassed by U.S. tourists acting the "Ugly American" part to perfection at tourist attractions in Europe which I visited. And I had the rather painful

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experience of being considered a foreigner in my own land when we moved back to the States in 1969. Physically painful – I took a beating as a regular course from some tough Long Island kids until I learned to “stawp tawkin’ like a Limey and be a regular guy from Lon Guyland.” And, of course, as a sophisticated nineteen-year old, I was horrified at the parochialism of my relations in Herculaneum, Missouri and Bald Knob, Arkansas, but I still loved them and the deep sense of rootedness that I felt in those small towns. Unlike Ken, though, I doubt that I’ll ever willingly settle in small-town Missouri.

By a happy coincidence, I spent most of the day this past Monday with a friend from my Rice years and our conversation, not coincidentally, turned to some of these same themes. Fr. Dave Borbridge is a Jesuit who taught in the Department of Religion in my years at Rice and now teaches both theology and history at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama. I took at least three courses from Dave and he became a personal friend as well as a spiritual mentor. We reconnected a few years ago and I discovered that he comes to this area every other year or so to serve as vacation relief for a friend who is the pastor at Holy Trinity parish in Bremerton. During our wide-ranging conversation on Monday, we mused over how it might be possible, within the structure of the lectionary, to reflect on the national holiday in sermons we would preach today. I don’t know how Dave decided to do it but I decided to dump the lectionary and go with my instincts.

As Fr. Dave and I walked and sat and chatted in a park on the Bremerton shoreline, we admired the beauty of our surroundings. We talked about all the places we had lived and seen and I don’t think there could have been any doubt that both of us are persons who take seriously the call to be, as James Weldon Johnson wrote, “true to our native land.” The problem, as Boswell records Samuel Johnson as saying, is that “patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel” – not the true patriotism, of course, of self-sacrifice for one’s neighbors and of discerning appreciation and love for one’s place of origin accompanied by a clear-eyed sense of its points of necessary growth, but rather the blind nationalism that can be whipped into self-centered frenzy by dishonest demagogues. As a self-described patriot, I still take the singing of our national anthem seriously, I still rise with pride to join in the pledge of allegiance, I still cringe to see the Stars and Stripes mishandled out of carelessness or ignorance. But I would uphold the rights of serious-minded protestors to burn that same flag or of conscientious objectors to remain seated and silent during all or part of the pledge or the anthem. Upholding free speech and other freedoms, after all, is part of true loyalty to the ideals of our country.

And, perhaps more to the point on this Sunday morning, I am conscious even as a proud American that, as Paul wrote to the Philippians, “our citizenship is in heaven.” It gives me a sense of perspective as I consider both the strengths and weaknesses of our country. It reminds me that my ultimate allegiance is not to a flag or to the country for which it stands but to the God of Abraham and Sarah, who called them to leave their home and travel to a place they had not seen, the God of Moses and Aaron and Miriam, who made of their obscure little family the leaders who rallied their people to follow the Presence of God back to the Promised Land of their ancestors, the Father of Jesus, who sent his disciples to preach the Good News to their hereditary enemies in Samaria, to their oppressors in Rome and to those they had previously understood as unclean around the world.

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I believe that the passages I read earlier contain the keys to combating that destructive nationalism that Fr. Dave and I discussed on Monday, the nationalism that insists that all other nations must adopt the American Way in order to be healthy, the nationalism that would close our borders to anyone other than the ones that we for various reasons would see as “like real Americans,” those perhaps with fair skin and round eyes, fluent in our native tongue. We often think that the message of the Old Testament is that the Children of Israel are the Chosen People in terms of God’s preference for them over others but we neglect the concept that the Chosen are chosen not for special glory but to reveal the love of God for all humankind. An early seed of this idea can be found in the words of God to Moses prior to the delivery of the Ten Commandments, words which he was to relay to all the people: “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” Again and again in the Psalms, the devotional songbook of ancient Israel, we find the affirmation that Yahweh is king over all the nations; that the world belongs to God. In the writings of the prophets, the concept grows more clear, that Israel is a light to the nations. In the vision reported by both Isaiah and Micah, all eyes will be directed to Israel to find the secret of life and of peace: “In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

This vision of human unity becomes attached to the ministry of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, in a passage that the Gospel According to Matthew explicitly links with Jesus: “This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles... And in his name the Gentiles will hope.”” As previously mentioned, Jesus then directed his followers to set aside concerns over religious heritage and national boundaries, a message of unity that the Apostle Paul restated to the Christians in Colossae: “there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!” Even the apocalyptic Revelation of John, which many have cited to back messages of divisiveness and strife, actually builds towards a vision of this same human unity and peace, with all humankind worshipping God and with the leaves of the tree of life in the midst of the New Jerusalem providing healing for the nations. It strikes me as very difficult to work up much enthusiasm for an exclusivist gospel or a jingoistic nationalism when we hear how God sees national boundaries as being washed away in Christ, how God claims all humankind as God’s own and how the role of the believer is to be God’s servant in spreading this Good News of peace and love.

I think it’s even harder to justify the type of nationalism that leads to anti-immigration feelings when we take seriously the witness of the Bible. If there are many scripture passages which speak of the God of Israel as the God of all nations, there are even more which detail God’s care for the immigrant. From the time of Abraham and Sarah, God’s people were wandering people,

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often unwanted in the places they settled. In the laws of the Torah, God's people are reminded again and again to remember their origins and to open their hearts to those in similar circumstances. The freedom of Sabbath rest, mandated in the Ten Commandments, is to be not just for the Children of Israel but for the alien resident in their towns as well. Listen to these commandments from God in the Books of Moses: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt... You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God... When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." I've mentioned here before that the Deuteronomic Law mandated that the tithe of first fruits every third year was to be given to feed "the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows..." When the prophets began to detail the shortcomings of God's people and to declare God's impending judgment upon them, their poor treatment of immigrants was duly noted. Listen to this from Ezekiel: "Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the alien residing within you suffers extortion; the orphan and the widow are wronged in you... The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress." I wonder what the prophets would have to say to this nation, which so many claim to be specially blessed by God, in regards to immigrants? There has been a fair amount of press this weekend about the reopening of the crown of the Statue of Liberty, accessible to the public for the first time since the September 11th attacks. It has been hailed as the beginning of a new chapter in the history of these United States. I hope that we Americans will learn once again to respect the famous words penned by Emma Lazarus as part of a fundraiser for the pedestal of the Statue:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Some of you will have figured out by now, in the nearly four and a half years that I've served as your pastor, that I'm just a sentimental old so-and-so. Little things have the potential to choke me up and mist my eyes; things like singing "The Star-Spangled Banner," or saluting the flag on a special day, or the beauty of the river bluffs of my dad's hometown and the Ozark foothills that my mother's family called home. There's still a lot of that little expatriate American boy in me. But if those positive reflections on our country have the ability to move me deeply, so do these things: singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," as we did at the beginning of our service – a song

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sometimes called “The Negro National Anthem,” as it was written by African-Americans at a time when their participation in our national dream was still tangential at best; or considering the ways in which the European immigrants to this continent, among whom were many of my ancestors, committed an effective genocide against the original inhabitants of these lands, among whom were others of my ancestors; or the ways in which many of our countrymen now speak of and treat those who are coming to our country looking for a new life. These things move me to deep sadness and anger rather than to pride and gratitude. But on this day after Independence Day, on this 5th of July, I find that my sadness and my anger over my country’s shortcomings and my pride in my country’s accomplishments all pale in comparison with my gratitude to God, who calls all humankind to embrace the love of God and of neighbor and who grants us the faith and the grace and the newness of life to be able to do so. As we prepare for our participation in The Lord’s Supper, the act of Communion that binds us to each other, to our God and to every other believer around the world, regardless of denomination or nationality, let us take as our prayer not only the words of James Thiem’s 60s style communion hymn, which calls us to love our fellow humans and to die to selfishness, but also the words of a hymn we have heard this morning but not sung. I’m referring to “America, the Beautiful,” which Pam played so beautifully for us this morning, and to the words of the little-sung second and third verses: “America! America! May God thy gold refine, till all success be nobleness and every gain divine... America! America! God mend thy every flaw, confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.” May this be our prayer as we seek to bring our lives ever closer to the Way of Jesus and our world ever closer to the Beloved Community of God. Amen.