

A few summers ago, Lee and I were in Philadelphia for the 4th of July.
We stood with hundreds of other people on Benjamin Franklin parkway,
watching a massive fireworks display.

The previous day we had visited Independence National Historical Park,
which includes the Liberty bell and the remains of the first presidential
residence, where George Washington and John Adams lived.

I was impressed by the sense of history,
and I was moved by the effort that had been taken
to tell the truth about our history as a nation.

The presidential house was filled with an exhibit about slavery,
and the truth that the first presidents of our nations,
and many of our nation's revered founders, owned slaves.

The hall with the Liberty bell was filled with history about America's struggles
to gain the equality it champions for all its people – particularly exhibits about
the struggle for voting rights for women and people of color.

So I was distressed to hear news in January that the exhibit about slavery was
one of the exhibits being removed from national parks and monuments.

In a news article in E&E news, Heather Richards wrote,

Trump issued an executive order last year titled "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History" that demanded U.S. historical sites depict the country as a consistent progressive force and slammed what the president characterized as a focus on negative history that generates "a sense of national shame." The order called out the Independence park by name as a place subjected to "corrosive ideology."

Philadelphia City Council member Kenyatta Johnson called the removal of the exhibit an effort to "whitewash American history" that threatens public understanding of the past. "History cannot be erased simply because it is uncomfortable," Johnson said in a statement. "Removing items from the President's House merely changes the landscape, not the historical record."

Our friend Pastor Kate Schlechter was in Philadelphia a few weeks ago,
and she also commented on being moved by the Independence park exhibits.
The slavery exhibits are still down, but a group of volunteers have organized to be
present at the presidential house every day to read the words from the exhibit.

They continue to share the story of slavery in America in oral tradition,
unwilling to let the whitewashing of history stand.

This weekend we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, which famously states:

“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 those are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”

Yet for many of us, the celebration is uncomfortable.

We see our country moving farther and farther away from its stated ideals,
from its promise of equality for all,
from the stories that tell of a land of the free and home of the brave.

As I read the prayer we used to start the service today,
I was struck by this idea of the stories we tell.

“We come together in worship,” we prayed,
to listen to stories about you as we remember and share our own stories.
“May we be compassionate and generous in the stories we tell about one another.
“May we be faithful and humble in the stories we tell about you”

So much of the struggle for the soul of the United States right now
is based in the conflicting stories we choose to tell –
about who we have been, about who we are,
about what makes us great, about what makes us free.

There is a story told by Christian Nationalists –
The false story of a Christian nation founded on shared Christian values.
The false story of equality achieved,
and erasure of the painful history of Native American genocide and chattel slavery
The false story of a nation built and made great by white people, for white people;
by Christians, for Christians; by Americans, for Americans only.
The false story that God has chosen us over and above other nations,
that God loves us best.

And there is a story we know to be true.
The story of a nation founded on the principle of free expression
of religion and culture
The story of a dream of equality, never realized but longed for,
struggled for, prayed and worked and marched for, for over 250 years.

The story of a nation built by immigrants on stolen land.
The story of a nation which has tried, over the centuries,
to live up to its stated ideals of liberty and justice for all.

The story of a nation which is one among the whole world God dearly loves –
our lives no more valuable than the lives of peoples in other nations.
The story of a nation we love, with gratitude for what it has given us,
and hope for what it can be.

Have any of you been watching the World Cup?
It's fun, to see the beautiful game played at such a level.
It was fun to be in New York City last week with so many World Cup visitors,
to watch the England game in a local pub full of England supporters.
It's fun to follow the stories, such as the story of the Cabo Verde team –
the first time this tiny island nation has fielded a team in the World Cup ,
and they made it to the round of 32, and held their own with World Cup
champions Argentina in a game that went into overtime
before Argentina scored the winning goal.

There are two levels of stories about the United States and the World Cup.
At one level are the stories of exclusion.
The story of all the participants, officials and ticket-holding fans denied entry to the
United States, including a referee from Somalia
and the mother of the Cabo Verde goalkeeper.
The requirement that the Iranian team not be allowed to spend the night in the United
States, requiring exhausting extra travel for them to play games in the U.S. but return
each night to Mexico.
Professor Jules Boykoff wrote that
“it looks more like the World Cup of exclusion than inclusion.”

And yet.
The stories of the fans who have come to the U.S. are stories of welcome and American
friendliness – some referring to the whole experience as a love fest.
The Scottish fans (the Tartan Army) drinking Boston and Miami dry.
The Algerians becoming honorary Kansans,
and Kansans become honorary Algerians.
Koreans and Mexicans swapping jerseys and shots of tequila.

The Norwegians doing their rowing cheer wherever they go –
stadiums, hotels, subways.

Visitors from around the world having their minds blown by Bar-B-Que and Buc-ee's
waffle houses and free refills,
and having suitcases full of ranch dressing stopped at customs.

It's been referred to as the world's great sleepover,
and it shows us the best of what the U.S. has been and can be –
welcome for all, kindness and generosity among neighbors and friends.

Two stories of the United States, and both true.

The kindness and welcome is true.

The exclusion is true.

The United States is living out both of these stories,
struggling for which will prevail in our common life and government.

And we who are citizens are in the position to decide which narrative we want
to dominate our politics and our life together.

I had a conversation with my dad on Friday about the flag,
and why so many of us in the United States have given over the flag,
and the whole idea of patriotism, to Christian Nationalists.

We've allowed them to define patriotism with their narrow and exclusive brush.

Yet patriotism is different than nationalism.

Patriotism is the feeling of love and gratitude for one's homeland.

Nationalism is a love of country that insists that we are better than anyone else,
that our political and financial interests should take precedence over
other nations or world interests.

Patriotism has room for truth-telling –

indeed, insists on listening to all the stories of our past and present,
seeing the complicated beauty of who we are and the dream of who we can be.

So when this flag (*image on slide*) came up in my social media Friday afternoon,

I took a screenshot and saved it –

a flag reflecting the hopes and dreams of what the United States can be.

In the words of NYC Mayor Zohran Mamdani,

*Patriotism has never been about pretending our nation is without flaws.
Patriotism is every act of righteous dissent, it is every march led under the
heavy sun, it is every protest held a decade before its time. It is precisely
because we love this nation that we will not leave it; after all, who loves
America more than those who have sacrificed so much to make it free.*

Pastor Kate Schlechter is reflecting in her sermon today on her visit to Philadelphia. She says,

Standing before the Liberty Bell, what caught my attention was not the famous crack. It was the inscription:

"Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof."

Those words come not from the Declaration of Independence but from Leviticus. Yes, Hebrew Scriptures.

And in Leviticus, liberty is never simply about individual rights. It is about restoration. It is about making sure people are not permanently trapped by debt, failure, or injustice.

Pastor Kate continues,

When Christianity becomes fused with national power, something precious is lost.

Because Jesus never said, "Blessed are the powerful."

He said, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

He never taught domination. He taught servanthood.

He never commanded us to protect privilege. Or our needs for comfort.

He commanded us to love and serve our neighbors.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus invites all of us who are weary and heavy-burdened to come to him and find rest.

But the rest Jesus offers, the freedom Jesus offers,
is not a freedom from expectations or burdens.

It is a freedom of becoming yoked with Jesus in the work of discipleship.

Freedom for love.

Freedom for mercy.

Freedom for courage.

The story we share as Christians is a story of steadfast love and covenant

Of a God who asks God's people to welcome the stranger
and care for the most vulnerable in society.

Our story is a story of God become human to live among us,

healing and feeding without discrimination,

eating with outcasts and sinners,

and giving himself in love.

It is a story of hope and new life, new life promised by God
who created the world and everything in it;
who loves us and calls us by name
and sends us to live in love for the common good of all creation.

This is our story. This is our hope.

Not that our nation, our religion, our way of life might triumph,
But that all may live and thrive, in our nation and around the world;
that all may share in freedom and equality and access to basic needs.

As we recognize the 250th anniversary of our nation,
this is our shared dream of liberty and justice for all.

May we continue to pray and hope, to vote and protest and advocate,
to work and live in love, that the dream may be true for all.

Amen.