

BORN IN AMERICA
Randall Tremba
July 5, 2015
14th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

* * *

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he ruled forty years.

Mark 6:1-13

So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

I, Too, Sing America

Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed--
I, too, am America

* * *

Sixty-eight years ago, my mother was rushed from a July Fourth picnic to the hospital and forever thereafter I would hear how my mother gave up watermelon, hot dogs and fireworks to give birth to me. Thanks, mom. What a sacrifice!

I was born on July 5th, 1947—68 years ago.

At the time I didn't know I was white. At the time I didn't know I was male. I didn't know I was heterosexual. And I didn't know I was an American.

At the time I didn't know what love, mercy and forgiveness were. I didn't know what hatred, bigotry and discrimination were. I didn't know what racism and homophobia were. I didn't know fear at all.

Some things you're born with. Some things you learn.

I was born in America but I didn't know that I was an American. And I sure didn't know that 68 years later to the day—July 5th 2015— I would be screaming for the United States to beat Japan in the Women's World Cup championship. U-S-A. U-S-A.

And speaking of beating Japan, 68 years ago I didn't know that the United States of America had dropped atomic bombs on two Japanese cities killing more than 200,000 people, including children. Years later I would learn as part of my American education, or should I say, my *schooling*, which, by the way, is not the same as education—I learned that the annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was justified in order to save a million American lives. It made me proud to be an American.

Later, after my schooling, I learned that wasn't quite true. I learned the untold story. I learned that Japan had been ready to surrender. Those bombs, especially the second one, were militarily and politically unnecessary.

Not all agreed then. Not all agree now. But in my schooling I never heard differing views. America the beautiful had done the right thing. Period.

After my schooling, I learned America may be beautiful but it's not always wise or good or right. Nor is it always evil. Like any other nation we are capable of both good and evil. We are not exceptional in that regard. Like every other nation, we have reasons to be proud and reasons to be ashamed. We have reasons to celebrate and reasons to repent.

Jesus assembled the twelve disciples and sent them out two by two. He gave them authority over the unclean spirits and said to them, "Wherever you enter a house—or, we might say, a nation—stay there until you leave. If any place will not welcome you and refuses to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Notice the strategy. If you're rejected, don't kill anybody. Just walk away. That's Jesus for you.

That may sound like something from a certain time and place, but it's really a parable for all time. In one way or another the Beloved keeps sending out a message to all peoples and nations: *Repent. Turn from your wicked ways and be transformed. Love one another and you shall be whole and well.*

Time and time again America has heard that message. Time and time again we have repented.

I was born in America but at the time I didn't know I was an American. Years later I would learn that Columbus discovered America.

Later I learned the untold story of genocide. I learned that this continent was and had been inhabited by native peoples for thousands of years before the Vikings, Columbus or anyone else bumped into it. Many of the indigenous peoples called this continent Turtle Island. Unfortunately for them they stood in the way of a European crusade to rid the land of infidels the way ancient Israel had once rid their promise land of Canaanites with the bloody sword.

So all the tribal elders of Israel came to the David and anointed him King. David was thirty years old when he began to reign, and he ruled forty years—and in case you hadn't heard, he ruled with a bloody sword. Which inspired the battle song: King Saul killed his thousands, King David his tens of thousands. David was not exceptional. David was typical.

It would take nearly a thousand years before a descendent of David would be born and proclaim a different kind of kingdom, a different kind of ruler and rule, the rule of love. At age 30—the same age that David began his rule—Jesus began to say over and over: *Love your enemies.*

You can hear that message today in many places, from many voices. *Put your faith in love and forgiveness.* But when someone has you in the sites of his gun, it's hard to believe in love, non-violence or forgiveness. Violence seems the only answer.

And that's a kind of a faith—a belief that violence will save us. It's not certain that it will. Violence can breed more violence. So it's a kind of faith. But that wasn't the faith of Jesus or the Emanuel Nine.

Europeans were weaned on biblical stories of holy war. They came to these shores thinking they were the new Israel, chosen by God to be a light to the world and therefore the United States would always be holy, noble and right. I learned that in Sunday School.

I also learned in Sunday School that God had ordained black people to serve white people as their slaves. My Baptist Sunday School teacher showed me a verse in the Bible that proved it. She actually put her finger on a specific verse in Genesis. Nothing I learned in public school questioned that or questioned that gays were an abomination unto the Lord. She put her finger on that verse too—in Leviticus.

In public school I never heard that the prosperity of the United States had been built on the backs of slaves. I wasn't told that slavery violated the Constitution of our nation or the primary teachings of the Bible. Later I would learn it from the untold story, from the brave voices of people like Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King.

I graduated from high school in 1965, 50 years ago. After I graduated I began to learn that my beloved country could be cruel, barbarian, bigoted, racist, homophobic and arrogant. *But I would not have learned such things if truth were censored in this country. Here in the United States we cherish, protect and practice freedom of speech.*

And I sing that America.

Patriotism without criticism has no head. Criticism without patriotism has no heart.

Over time I have learned yet another story. Yes, America has committed grave sins; but it is also beautiful, kind, just and humble. At certain times it defends the weak. And it knows how to repent.

In fact, our constitution is based on the understanding that all human beings and all human institutions have a propensity toward evil. We believe power corrupts; and absolute power corrupts absolutely. And thus we have a system of checks and balances, which includes the Supreme Court.

America is a young nation. It's a nation still in the making, an unusual experiment in grace and generosity. I mean, what other nation posts on its front door these words:

*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!*

I sing that America.

Our nation aspires to be hospitable to those from beyond our borders and those disenfranchised within our borders. It's how we came to see that "all men are created equal" means something greater than just the wealthy white men the founding fathers meant. Those transcendental words would come to mean women, poor people and even former slaves. It would come to mean that gays and lesbians can marry legally in this land.

That too is America.

And I sing that America.

The United States is a secular—not a Christian—nation. And for that we should be glad and very grateful. But our nation like any other nation can cherish the vision of the Beloved Community that transcends nation, religion, and politics. And so we keep praying and keep working so that all peoples in this land and all lands can be one. One body. One family. One country. One world. One heart. One love.

* * *

HYMN

“One Bread, One Body”