

## Honest Patriotism

Preached on July 3, 2022

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, UU Society of Sacramento

With Blessing Ritual for Elected Lay Leaders (printed at end)

Hymns: #1000, Morning Has Come; #138, We Would Be One; #121, We'll Build a Land.

Piano: Fanfare for the Common Man (Aaron Copland), Shenandoah (American trad in the style of Keith Jarrett), I Wish I Knew How it Would Feel to be Free (Billy Taylor, arr. Nina Simone), played by Irina Tchantceva.

Introduction to Video: I'll Be Back (words and music, Lin-Manuel Miranda) from Hamilton, sung by Anthony Tavianini.

The 4<sup>th</sup> of July is tomorrow. It marks 246 years since the Declaration of Independence turned 13 British colonies into a new country, the United States of America. The signers of the Declaration were all white men. The Declaration's main author, Thomas Jefferson, was theologically a Unitarian, though he attended an Anglican church. Jefferson was also a slaveholder, as were several other signers of the document whose words declare: "All men are created equal."

Though these colonists all came from British backgrounds, they held a variety of religious orientations and political agendas. Among them were several Anglicans, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and two Quakers. John Adams was a Unitarian signer. Dr. Benjamin Rush was a Universalist who signed it.

The colonies broke away from Great Britain's King George III over various disputes with Crown policies, which they listed in the Declaration. But the king would not let them go without a fight. The Revolutionary War lasted from 1775 till 1784. Right now, we will explore the perspective of King George on the loss of his colonies. He considered the American founders to be traitors as well as fools. The composer Lin-Manuel Miranda imagined the King's perspective in his musical "Hamilton." Our Music Director and Pianist recorded that song for us last fall. Let's watch it now, in honor of Independence Day.

## Sermon

On the eve of the birthday of the United States, I have a question for you: What is one thing you continue to cherish about this country? For some of us, this is a hard question right now. It's been such a rough couple of weeks, owing to a majority of the members of the Supreme Court. For starters, they told parents of public-school students that a public school's coach can subject his team to his religious pronouncements at school events like football games. Amid the ongoing climate crisis, the Court has cut back the U.S. government's ability to regulate power plants that produce air pollution. Amid the current scourge of gun-violence terrorism by teenagers and adult men, the Court has told states they cannot restrict people from openly carrying a gun in public. In throwing out *Roe vs. Wade*, a Court ruling that's nearly 50 years old, they took away the freedom to receive abortion services. This endangers the dignity and safety and lives of countless adults and youth. With apparent glee, one justice hinted that the Court might use the same reasoning to attack other protections of personal dignity, liberty, and equality.

How much worse of an assault on American achievements could we have expected right before the 4th of July? Normally, Independence Day is holiday of celebration and unity across

the nation. We cheer fireworks, applaud band concerts, and chow down at barbecues and picnics. Yet for those of us who care about equality, inclusion, and protecting the environment, it's hard to cheer right now. If you're like me you're feeling not cheerful but dread-full. Yet it is always important to take time on a civic holiday to reflect as much as to celebrate. It's worth remembering that the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, the very first 4<sup>th</sup> of July, in 1776, wasn't a barbecue, it was an audacious, dangerous day of treason against the British Crown. So if on this Independence Day you are scared for the future, imagine how people felt in those days of revolution.

If, like me, you are worried, sad, and angry about the direction of the country, be assured that such deep emotions are personal demonstrations of true patriotism, *your* patriotism and mine. We love this country. We care about its treatment of people—in the past, present, and future. We know that it *can* be more just, more fair, more decent—and we long for it to be. This is Honest Patriotism. It does not ignore the truths of our complicated history. Yet honest patriotism believes that we can make America good—for everyone. *Dishonest* patriotism, on the other hand, denies the shadows and sinful aspects of our history. It says our flaws don't matter or don't exist.

James Baldwin, the African American writer and activist who lived from 1924 till 1987, said this: “The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed that collection of myths to which white Americans cling: [the myths] that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or that Americans are invincible in battle and wise in peace.” Having such a perspective doesn't mean resignation to the way things are, but action for change. With an honest view of where we have been, Baldwin argued, we can begin to achieve our country as a place of decency. Considering the legacy of genocide of indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Black people, you could say that this country was “built was built in sin,” in the words of Parker Richards. In a recent magazine article, Richards points out *also* that America also “has been a country that could be built anew [--rebuilt--] upon its own foundations.” It was rebuilt by people who were willing to try. It was rebuilt by people of moral courage, vision, solidarity, and sacrifice. That legacy is something we can cherish.

Understandably, some of us are shy patriots. We care deeply about this country but we might worry that showing *pride* in it is arrogant, self-centered and ignorant of the sins we have committed. Yet the late American philosopher Richard Rorty said that national pride is necessary. It is necessary in order to make things better. Rorty said in a lecture in 1998 that “National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individual [persons]. [It is] a necessary condition for self-improvement. Rorty said: “Just as too little self-respect makes it difficult for a person to display moral courage” [or make changes in their life], so insufficient national pride makes [us] less likely to have an energetic and effective debate about” where the country is going. Honest patriotism has no need of shame, for shame is paralyzing.

We *are* a country built on lands taken from indigenous people—sometimes taken in betrayal of our treaties, and often with violence. We are also a country where land grants allowed the founding of public universities, and which created higher education systems to educate a large portion of the population, and which draw students and scholars from all over the globe. We are a country built on enslaved labor. We are also the country that waged a Civil War in order to end slavery. To be sure, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the systems established long ago on the basis of white dominance still cause African Americans to be met with suspicion, suppression, and state violence, including mass incarceration and police brutality. Other

countries have brutal histories too. Human history is filled with brutality. Yet that does not let us off the hook as members of this American society. Honest patriotism calls us to action.

We are the country where ordinary African Americans and their Black leaders and white allies got the Congress and the President to enact the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Act, and the Fair Housing Act in the 1960s. We are the country that recently has elected an African American President and a female Vice President who is Black and Indian American. We have just witnessed the swearing-in of the first female Black Supreme Court Justice.

So many of us are beleaguered and burdened by the dangerous direction of this country. It can be tempting to give up, to write off this country's possibilities. To many people, that's the appeal of Donald Trump and his allies. That's the lure of Christian white nationalism. To them, our expansions of equality and freedom in America are evidence that the country has become so decadent that *they* must take it over by fraud and by force. To them, it's better to tear down our institutions than permit these institutions to respond to legitimate claims for equal opportunity and equal justice under the law. In spite of how sad, worried, or worn out we feel—we must remember that the future is open. It always has been. And the future is worth struggling for.

We are the country where women worked for the right to vote for generations, but many didn't see it in their lifetimes. They finally achieved it--133 years after the national Constitution had been adopted! We are also the country that produced the Equal Pay Act in 1963 to outlaw gender-based wage discrimination, and Title 9 of the Civil Rights Act, which prohibits gender discrimination in educational programs. One of our members who is in her 80s noted to me: "These are just a few of the equalizers that were not in existence when I was growing up or entering the work force." She cherishes these achievements. We are the country that achieved Medicare coverage for older people in the 1960s. We achieved coverage for younger people in 2010 through the Affordable Care Act.

Parker Richards has written: "Countries are flawed but countries are also ever-changing." It is people who can make the changes. For good or ill, a country is "fundamentally alterable."

Honest patriotism embraces all our grief and all our lament *and* all our hopes. Honest patriotism can remember a nation's wrongs not for shame but in order to pursue more decency and more justice. It is crucial also to remember what we cherish about this country. It is crucial to remember what we love, and then to celebrate it and extend it. In last Friday's email message to the congregation as well as in recent conversations, I asked many of you this question: Amid all the sadness and fear you might feel in these times, what is one thing you continue to cherish about this country?

One member told me that she cherishes the right to trial by jury. She said: "I just completed service on a jury in a criminal trial. My understanding is that in many countries, one must prove their innocence as opposed to their accusers proving the person's guilt. I appreciate the fact that in this country people are innocent until proven guilty."

One member wrote that they find inspiration from "the people in communities around the country doing the hard work of trying to make their place a better place for everyone who lives there, works there, or passes through. Non-profits, community organizations, individual volunteers -- so many people with such huge hearts working at small, but very important tasks."

In answer to my question, two people told me they cherish the natural landscapes of this country, especially the National Parks and other public lands. One said she gets inspiration from "the heart-aching beauty of this land and the appreciation of that beauty by so many people all around the country. An example is the recent increased use of our National Parks."

I hope you will engage with others in conversation about this question—today after church, tomorrow at a picnic, and (especially) whenever you find yourself at a loss for words in an argument about politics. What is one thing that you continue to cherish about this country?

Here is one of my answers. I cherish our creativity. We are the country where people produced jazz music and the blues, African American spirituals, rock and roll, Gospel music, and the show tunes of American musical theater.

In July of 2019, I visited New York City. I saw a play off-Broadway and a musical on Broadway. But what stays in my mind from the trip is the Sunday service at Middle Collegiate Church in lower Manhattan. The Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis has been the congregation's first African American woman senior pastor since she arrived there in 2004. Middle Church was founded by Dutch Calvinists in 1628. Yet it is now a leading multi-racial and progressive Christian congregation. Leaders from other churches go there to learn from it. On the summer day we were there for church, Dr. Lewis introduced a high school group in the balcony—visiting from France! They were touring the United States to learn about Gospel music. In France Christianity has been in decline for generations, yet Gospel music is a big thing in France these days. I hadn't known that! We stayed after church for a lunch in the social hall—free for everyone. After the crowd thinned out a bit, Dr. Lewis called people back to the sanctuary. She wanted the French teenagers to hear more Gospel music--and sing it. As we watched, the choir director put half of them on the chancel and kept the other half of them on the main floor and led them in the style of call-and-response choral singing. To be sure, every country has its music and cultural traditions, but this is my country, and I cherish its music and its creativity. I cherish our spirit of reinvention.

As Richards has written, the past does not determine the future. "It informs it. It shapes it. But it does not dictate it." It is only by aiming at the goal of achieving a better society that we can make society better. Along these lines, one member told me that she cherishes the resilient spirit of the people who keep fighting for a better world no matter the setbacks. She is grateful for those who don't give up trying to make things better in this country, and to make this country better.

What is one thing you still cherish about this country? Another member said to me: "I cherish the possibilities." This is the reason for patriotism. Honest patriotism examines the past in order to understand it, but works for a better future. Patriotism does not wallow in shame. It cultivates pride by celebrating what we continue to cherish. Patriotism generates energy to achieve the country we long for. It pursues the possibilities.

The future is always open. Don't resign yourself to the bad news of these times. Our love and our vision for this country are stronger than we might feel. Let us keep looking toward the future, with courage. Let us remember what we love, and then celebrate it, and extend it.

Let us cherish the possibilities. So may it be. Amen.

**Blessing of Our Elected Lay Leaders**  
Sunday, July 3, 2022

**Minister:** The first of July was the first day of a new program year and budget year at our congregation. It is also the day that several newly elected lay leaders begin their terms of service. They are joining others whose terms of service are continuing or who have signed on for another term. I would like to invite all of them to come to the front. If you are starting or continuing your service on the Board of Trustees, Program Council, Nominating Committee or Endowment Trust, please come forward or turn on your Video in Zoom. Today is a good day to recognize and celebrate the commitment of all of our elected lay leaders, new and continuing. If you are in Zoom, please type your name and the position in which you are serving, and where you are new or continuing in the role. If you are in the room, please introduce yourself and tell us the position in which you are serving, then remain up here.

**Introduction of Lay Leaders** (they introduce themselves and say what their position is (e.g., a continuing at-large trustee on the Board, a new member of the Board)).

**Minister:** We celebrate your decision to serve as our elected leaders. In our tradition of congregational polity, it is the members who have the ultimate power for major decisions and future directions of the church. Members entrust elected leaders with specific roles and authority. Yet all of us together have the responsibility for supporting, sustaining and caring for this congregation. First we have words from the lay leaders, and then the rest of us will respond.

**Lay Leaders:** We promise to keep in mind the UUSS mission and covenant. We will care for the whole community, for its current and future generations. We promise to communicate needs and opportunities for service of our UUSS mission. We ask for your shared support and involvement.

**Members and Friends:** We promise to support you and the congregation. We will bring our concerns to you, trusting that you will hear them. We will tell you our opinions, questions, and ideas. We also will express our thanks and praise. Whenever you are doing the work of this congregation, remember that our good will is with you. We are humbled by your dedication to this community. We bless you with our thanks and our trust.

**Lay Leaders:** The work of building the Beloved Community belongs to all of us together. Our mission is a shared one. In mutual trust, let us promote our religious values, embody our covenant, and respond with grace to the call to serve. Amen and blessed be.