

Tomorrow, as you know, is the Fourth of July; and the challenge for the preacher is always how to acknowledge our most profound National Holiday, and also to worship as Christians. So I think about celebrations of the Fourth from my past and present. Like the town parade through St. Anthony Park when I was 11 years old, in the more innocent 1950's. I rode my bicycle in the parade, the spokes threaded with red, white and blue crepe paper, and a sign on the handle-bars celebrating the impending admission of Alaska and Hawaii to the Union. I was kind of my own small float.

I also remember a somewhat darker holiday when I was in my early 30's attending Yale Divinity School. There was no Div School chapel on the weekend, so those of us without internships had to find a local church for worship on Sundays. I chose a United Methodist Church in New Haven. Imagine my surprise when the opening procession was led not by the cross, but by the American flag, followed by men in military uniforms carrying side arms. This occurred shortly after the end of the Vietnam War, and many were feeling the darkness of national defeat. The response in a fairly conservative church was to show patriotism of the armed and dangerous variety.

So tomorrow is again the Fourth of July, and as a nation we find ourselves once more in an era that seems ominously dark. Many are feeling disillusionment and economic despair. The political tone of the presidential campaign has been filled with threatening rhetoric and raucous accusations, with threats leveled against religious groups and non-Caucasian races. But to see these things more clearly, we should consider the history of our country.

We are a morally ambiguous nation, having known both unique promise and frequent betrayal of that promise. This is hardly the first time the United States has seen a surge of anti-immigrant violence. From the 1830's to the 1850's in New England states there were riots directed at

Irish Catholics. In the 1870's Irish Americans in their turn attacked Chinese immigrants on the west coast.

Neither is racism a new strain of our history. After centuries here of African slavery, and the country's failure of real liberation after the Civil War, Black Americans have suffered economically, socially and legally. Beginning in 1980, race has been a barely disguised theme of political campaigns, with coded language to lure white, Anglo-Saxon voters.

We are a country of great promise, founded on the desire for a more equitable nation, safeguarded against dictatorship and demagoguery. We are a country of significant sins and failures, falling away from the ideals that went into the struggle for our independence. We here are citizens; but we are first Christians. What is the word we hear from our faith tradition about these matters?

A fundamental teaching of both the Hebrew and New Testaments is that religiously we come from a long line of strangers and sojourners in the land. As Deuteronomy puts it, "...the LORD your God executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

Jesus sharpens the message further when he teaches, "I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Be perfect, therefore, as the Lord your God is perfect."

We are the gathered community of those who are called to love the strangers, the enemies, the different. When we have sinned against that love, we are called to confess and to try again.

There was a column in the NY Times this past week about economically disenfranchised people in Pennsylvania. The accompanying picture showed a man and woman in a decrepit town of closed steel-mills, with the caption that this couple would likely support the presidential candidate who has for months been shouting loudly and profanely that they have been betrayed, pushed out of the American Dream, their well-being sacrificed to immigrants and terrorists and people of other religions.

My instant gut-response was to think, about the couple in the picture, "They are poor, uneducated and gullible, ignorant about what they and the country really need." But slowly the other side of my brain began to notice that these are the ones who are strangers in my personal neighborhood, those of a different socioeconomic group, with different life experiences, who might be considered enemies to my desired political choices. And how dare I judge! How dare I think that I can look down on my brothers and sisters in Christ?!

My but it's an easy trap to fall into. I, too, need to confess and try again. I, too, need to become perfect as God calls us to be perfect. This perfection does not mean never making mistakes, never committing sins. This perfection refers instead to being made whole and complete. Here in our words and in the Eucharist, we are called to travel the road to this Kingdom goal.

1984 film "Places in the Heart," is set in Waxahachie, Texas, in 1935. Its last few minutes depict a communion service in a small country church. The few folks in the sanctuary are doing their best to sing "Blessed Assurance" as they prepare to share communion. But then something remarkable happens. As the bread and wine are passed we see that, somehow, there are now more people in the pews: The bank president who tried to foreclose on a young widow's farm; Moze, the African American laborer who had helped the widow bring in a prizewinning crop of cotton, and the Klansmen who drove him out of town; the white men who lynched a black youngster after he mistakenly shot the town's beloved

sheriff; and, finally, the sheriff himself and the boy who had killed him. 'The peace of Christ,' the sheriff says to the boy as he shares the bread and wine. 'The peace of Christ,' the boy whispers in return.

The word of God and our acts of worship call us to keep walking just this the path toward God's perfect love. Here we are made more open to the reality of all people, to the Love that calls us together, that makes us more perfect. When we work to extend to all others the Shalom that is not mere peace, but the completion of God's will for our well-being, then we can both celebrate and heal our Nation.