

**I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings**  
**Independence Sunday, July 2, 2023, 10:00 a.m.**  
**All Saints Church, Pasadena**  
**The Rev. Mike Kinman**

Hear the Gospel according to Maya Angelou

The free bird thinks of another breeze  
and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees  
and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright  
and he names the sky his own

But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams  
his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream  
his wings are clipped and his feet are tied  
so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill  
of things unknown but longed for still  
and his tune is heard on the distant hill  
for the caged bird sings of freedom.

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We are a freedom singing people.  
Let me say that again,

We are a freedom singing people.  
And it's not just us.

It is the nature of human beings created in God's image.  
We long for  
We work for  
We sing for freedom.

The people of Israel exiled to Babylon were asked to sing the songs they used to sing in their home for the entertainment of their captors and they wailed "How can we sing God's song in a strange and foreign land?"

"How can the caged bird sing?" they lamented.

And yet generation after generation, all around the world, the caged bird has opened her throat to sing.

The Rascals said it best in the summer of 1968 – a summer of rebellion and uprising.

Why were people in the streets demanding their rights?

Why were people shouting and demanding their freedom?

Why was the caged bird singing?

All the world over, so easy to see  
People everywhere just wanna be free

There is an audacity to this nation, to these United States of America. We dare to call ourselves “the land of the free.”

I actually think that’s a good thing.  
It’s good to be aspirational.

When we at All Saints Church say our core values, when we say we believe the revolutionary Jesus with whom we walk and whom we strive to embody is Radical Inclusion, Courageous Justice, Joyful Spirituality and Ethical Stewardship it is a statement of who and how we are aspiring to be and a good one.

Aspirations are important ... as long as we don’t confuse aspiration with reality.

And that’s the tricky part about days like Independence Day.

Because on those days we come face to face with our radically different experiences of this nation and its freedom. And too often we fall short of the invitation to hold them together in tension and listen deeply to one another rather than to have one try to shout out the other.

Nothing about it is simple.

Because at the same time in this room we have people who fought and have had friends and family die ... who offered what Lincoln called the last full measure of devotion to this country and what it stands for ... and that has to be honored and respected.

And at the same time, we know that very, very few times were we actually fighting for freedom. That the vast majority of the times we ask people to go to war, it is to defend the economic interests of a select few, and who does the fighting, who benefits from the fighting and who gets to stay home and reap the benefits without taking any of the risks has everything to do with race and class ... as are how people are treated when they return ... and that voice must be heard as well.

At the same time in this room, we have people who have escaped ... sometimes quite literally ... from places of persecution and found freedom here unlike any they have ever experienced – and there is a beauty to the love those among us who have walked that road have for this nation.

And at the same time, we have people – sometimes the very same people – who are denied basic freedoms and suffer daily humiliating discrimination precisely because the liberty and justice of America has never been and still is not for all – and there is a beauty to their resilience that must be honored by making sure their struggle has not been in vain but rather is joined by us all.

And we are especially feeling it this week, when the Supreme Court has in essence legalized discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual people

...has preserved preferential treatment for wealthy white people at non-military educational institutions codifying into law that people of color are fine for the foxhole but not the classroom or the boardroom,

...and has denied release from the shackles of student debt to 43 million people who without those student loans could not have received the education that should be the birthright of every person.

Oh, there are millions of more caged birds banging their wings against significantly stronger bars today than there were a week ago.

Independence Day is a day of paradox. A nation laudably and deeply imperfectly founded on the selectively applied universal truth that people everywhere just oughta be free.

Independence Day is a day of paradox and as such it should not be a day of jingoism and vapid litmus tests of patriotism but of deep listening both to those who rightly trumpet where freedom has triumphed and to those who are still beating their wings on the cage door.

And if we are among the free birds ... the ones for whom freedom was intended in the Declaration of Independence and for whom freedom works well and who are so deeply grateful for the freedom we have and for whom days like Independence Day take on a nearly sacred dimension. Then of course we leap on the back of the wind and float downstream till the current ends and dip our wings in the orange sun rays and dare to claim the sky.

We name the sky our own. And why not? We are are only ones up there. And that feels good. Everyone should have that feeling.

If we are among the free birds, or to the degree we are among the free birds, the feeling of that freedom feels so good, so natural, so intuitive that it is easy to believe that all birds are free.

That the ones who aren't flying are simply not applying themselves. And certainly never that there is something about us that is keeping those birds from taking to the skies.

And yet if we are among the caged birds ... the ones to whom some or all of our nation's freedoms were not intended nor still extended and for whom days like Independence Day take on an almost unbearable irony... then we stalk down our narrow cage, can seldom see through our bars of rage, our wings are clipped and our feet are tied ... and yet the caged birds sing, too.

And Maya Angelou tells us why, quoting her fellow poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,  
 When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,  
 When he beats his bars and would be free;  
 It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
 But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,  
 But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings –  
 I know why the caged bird sings.

This morning, we heard Frederick Douglass singing the song of the caged bird. In words reminiscent of Amos, he says:

*“What, to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.*

Those words, particularly heard from the lectern of your church in a land where we are so fond of equating Christianity with the soul of the nation, hit our ears everywhere from the spectrum of deep resonance to deep offense. Several years ago, I posted Douglass' speech on my Facebook page as I do every July 4 prompting some members of this community to share with deep resonance, others to object and one even to leave the congregation because they thought the posting of these words on that day so inappropriate.

Douglass touches a nerve ... and nerves deliver pleasure and pain.

And yet Douglass' indictment, as accurate as it was then and as resonant as it is now, was not leveled against the principles on which this nation was founded but against our continued selective application of those principles to serve the twin gods of capitalism and whiteness.

Of the principles of America and the Declaration signed 247 years ago this week Douglass wrote

*"I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ring-bolt to the chain of your nation's destiny; so, indeed, I regard it. The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost."*

There is something to celebrate on Independence Day, and there is much of which we must take stock. And that brings us to a further complicating factor in our observance of Independence Day and that is we are the church and our allegiance to God in Christ supersedes any allegiance to nation – no matter how much people have tried to conflate the two or flip the rank of priority.

Now this is tricky territory in an age where Christian Nationalism is on the rise because there are fundamentalisms of the left as well as of the right and we don't want to become the evils we deplore. And because there has always been a tension between the urgency of the demand for justice and freedom and the reality that it is a long walk to justice and freedom.

The same Dr. King who said "the arc of the universe is long but bends toward justice" is the same Dr. King who said "justice delayed is justice denied." That is the tension we live in.

In the language of the story of Jesus, it is asking when do we engage with the Temple authorities and try to change their hearts and when do we turn over a few tables and make a whip of cords and drive out the moneychangers?

What makes both King and Douglass appropriate for us to consider as we wrestle with how we walk with the revolutionary Jesus down this freedom road is not only were they brilliant courageous thinkers, but that for both of them, the teachings of Christ were central to how they engaged the powers of this nation.

King as an ordained pastor was deeply rooted in the life of Christ. His Bible was as worn as the soles of his shoes.

And Douglass, though not a pastor, was fueled by a deep understanding of Christ that enabled him to see how this nation had perverted Jesus' teachings. Douglass writes:

*"I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ; I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial, and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity."*

As those who aspire to walk with the revolutionary Jesus, we are invited on Independence Day and every day to lean into the heart of Jesus' teachings. And what made the revolutionary Jesus revolutionary – what made him the embodiment of radical inclusion, courageous justice, joyful spirituality and ethical stewardship is the centrality of agape love. Love that is not just romantic

or filial but self-giving love that invites us to find true freedom in being as concerned with each other's freedom as we are for our own.

Love that is the most powerful force for healing and change in the universe.

Love that springs from the truth sung by Fannie Lou Hamer of blessed memory,

"Nobody is free until everybody is free."

And in this morning's Gospel, Jesus tells us that love must not just be applied to those who agree with us and stand on our side but to our enemies ... literally in the Greek *ekhros*, which comes from the root word for hatred. We must be concerned with the freedom of those who most wish us harm ... and recognize that the hatred that endangers some imprisons all, and that deep, abiding, militant love is the only way we will all get free.

It is the eternal tension between that long arc of history and the immediacy of justice delayed being justice denied. We must fight for the safety, dignity and even the very lives of those among us for whom flying free is still a dream and demand nothing less than cage abolition now for all God's children ... and we must do it in a way that has as its goal loving conversion rather than bitter defeat.

It is the Jesus wisdom of Pauli Murray, the first African American woman ordained in the Episcopal church when she said, "When my brothers try to draw a circle to exclude me, I shall draw a larger circle to include them."

When we hold the Declaration of Independence and indeed the history of our nation up to that ethic of Jesus, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Pauli Murray, we can see where we have succeeded and where we continually have fallen short.

We have succeeded where we have extended freedoms to everyone and we have fallen short when those who have the freedoms, when the free birds among us either fall into complacent contentment because we've got ours, or simply because of our lack of proximity to the cages, refuse to listen to the songs of the caged birds and the beat of their wings against the bars.

We have succeeded and we will succeed when we realize that our freedom is bound up in each other's ... and not only will we never be free until all are free, the task of being a part of each other's liberation is the deepest joy of which we are capable of experiencing as human beings. This is truly not just our job but our joy.

We dishonor the principles of the Declaration of Independence every time we believe or act as if the work is done. That sentiment is enshrined in the document itself, a document that calls us to continual self-examination and, when necessary continual revolution. I quote:

*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 these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.*

When governments do not extend life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to all, it is our right and I would say our duty to alter or even abolish that government. Our nation's founding document says we have both the right and responsibility to reform or even overthrow a government that has stopped serving the people. And the mere gendered restriction of the rights of freedom to men in this declaration shows us that even from the beginning this quest for freedom was an imperfect work in progress.

It is why Jesus went to the cross ... because he refused to stop proclaiming the Gospel of radical love and courageous justice in the face of a government that afforded those things only to a few.

It is why Barack Obama, on his whistle stop tour toward his inauguration in 2009 said the words we heard today, that we must engage this work anew. That "what is required is a new declaration of independence, not just in our nation, but in our own lives – from ideology and small thinking, prejudice and bigotry – an appeal not to our easy instincts but to our better angels."

And when we think of independence and freedom, we recognize that broadly speaking we can talk about two types of freedoms ... what we want freedom from ... and what we want freedom to.

What we long for freedom from are all the things that are binding us and keeping us from soaring. They are the big-ticket items in our national life. The racism and classism, the income, education and health care inequality that keep human thriving for some and not for all. They are also the personal things that are lead weights on our ankles. Our own hatreds and addictions, traumas and fears.

It is time for a new declaration of independence from these things. And that is what we will do today. To declare our independence from these things not as an accomplished feat but as a named and deep aspiration.

In your pews there are notecards. Pass them around so everyone has two and something to write with. On the first I invite you to write something from which you long to be free. Don't worry ... I'm not going to ask you to sign it or share it or even drop it in the basket to offer it at the altar.

Write something from which you long to be free. Your own declaration of independence. What is keeping you, what is keeping us from thriving as full images of God.

And what I will invite you to do with those is hold onto those after the service and then head out to the lawn. And there I invite you to take part in a holy and powerful tradition ... a tradition that was embodied by Gandhi in South Africa and Vietnam war opponents in this country and that is burning the symbol of what holds us captive. For Gandhi it was the passes that Indian nationals could not be without and which cemented their second-class citizenship. For draft resistors it was the draft card that demanded their body as cannon fodder in a war that had nothing to do with freedom. For us, it is a declaration of our deep desire to be free from that which holds us captive. A personal commitment to not give up the fight and to continue to work to free ourselves from everything that keeps us from flying free.

Then on the second card, I invite you to write what you long to be free to do or who you long to be free to be.

Maybe you long to be free to walk through a store without someone thinking you are going to steal something.

Maybe you long to be free to keep working at the job you love despite or even because of your age.

Maybe you long to be free to send your child out into the world without being afraid they will end up dead.

Maybe you long to be free to live in the same city where you work.

Maybe you long to be free to sing how you want to sing, worship how you want to worship, dance how you want to dance and love who you want to love, without anyone telling you "not here" or "tone it down a little, will you?"

What is it that you want to be free to do? I invite you to write that on the second card ... and outside on the lawn there will be a basket where I invite you both to leave your card and take one that someone else has left.

And the one you take, I invite you to put it in a place where you will see it every day this week. And I invite you to spend just a couple minutes each day asking God in prayer to make you an instrument of liberation for the person who wrote the card you hold.

Because it is time for a new Declaration of Independence.

It is time to fling open the doors of every cage and let every bird take flight.



Abolition is faithful and patriotic and both our founding document and our Gospel call us to overthrow any system or government that does not live up to the high standard of liberty and justice for all. And while that requires individual commitment by each of us it also requires recognizing that we will only get free if we extend the same agape love to each other that we long for ourselves.

That we will only get free when the caged bird's song comes from all of our lips.

When the circle is drawn large enough for everyone.

When we care as much about each other's liberty and justice as we enjoy and care for our own.

For if the church writ large in this nation were to array her powers against all from which we still need to be freed, the whole system of crime and blood would be scattered to the winds ... and if we do not do this, we are involved in the most awful responsibility of which the mind can conceive.

We cannot do it alone ... and we can do it together.

So, for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, let us mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

Amen.