

"The Partly Cloudy Patriot"

Sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

July 3, 2016

Because we none of us can quite believe the state in which we find our beloved country, this sermon takes a turn that is decidedly "if-you-think-things-are-bad-now-consider-our-history". The history I invite you to consider is the final days of the American Civil War and the weeks that followed.

So let's set the scene. It is March 4, 1865 – Abraham Lincoln's Inauguration. The country has been at war for the entirety of his first term. By now, nearly 750,000 Americans have died in that war. To put that in some perspective, the United States has not experienced that level of devastation in any other war in which we have been engaged – and the United States has been involved in nearly continuous war since our inception 240 years ago. Second to the Civil War is World War I with 405,399 deaths. The most recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – the longest in our history – have seen 6717 deaths.

Setting the scene. Here's a photo of President Lincoln's Second Inauguration.

In an eerie foreboding, the man who will kill Lincoln a little more than a month later stands on the veranda just above the president.

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address is inscribed on the Lincoln Memorial. Its beauty is timeless. Its conclusion is one of the readings that prefaced our weekly ritual of reading of the names of the war dead.

These words conclude the Second Inaugural Address:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Walt Whitman was in the audience on that March day. Upon hearing the address's sorrowful poetry, the great American poet said this:

After every great battle, a great storm. Even civic events, the same. On Saturday last, a forenoon like whirling demons, dark, with slanting rain, full of rage; and then the afternoon, so calm, so bathed with flooding splendor from heaven's most excellent sun, with atmosphere of sweetness; so clear, it show'd the stars, long, long before they were due. As the President came out on the Capitol portico, a curious little white cloud, the only one in that part of the sky, appear'd like a hovering bird, right over him. Walt Whitman, witnessing Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address

On April 9th, just five weeks later, the Confederate General Robert E. Lee will surrender at Appomatox thus the Civil War will begin to come to its end.

On April 14, 1865 President Lincoln is assassinated.

And we think we've got problems?

Let's put this time in perspective, Friends. Though there still lingers racist vestiges of a war fought to end our nation's sin that was slavery; though the Jim Crow South that followed has morphed into the "New Jim Crow", as Michelle Alexander so astutely recounted in her book of the same title; though we live in an imperfect union, we are a nation that has pushed back on injustice.

It takes too long for our liking, this pushing back. We may feel there aren't numbers enough united in the causes of justice and peace. Too often we are led toward despair and worse, always worse: whining.

This is what I heard over and over again at a General Assembly panel discussion on reproductive health and justice:

"I can't believe we're still fighting this fight."

Really? When in *any* nation's history has the struggle for justice and peace ever been without backlash and forever won?

We have a vigilance problem. We seem not to understand that we must be forever vigilant. And quit the whining. And quit the threatening to leave the country if a certain presidential nominee is elected.

Remember Frederick Douglas' prophetic words shared years before the start of the Civil War. In 1857 he said:

Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress. – Frederick Douglas 1857

So: Resistance. Vigilance. Hopefully, with words and not blows, but: vigilant resistance to all of the injustice and wrong imposed upon our kin and us.

Our country, our ancestors pushed back and then pulled themselves from so much wreckage in our history. Surely we can and will find a way through and out of the mess in which we find ourselves today.

There is hope.

I wish you all could have been at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly last week to witness the deep commitment to justice among those who gathered. The movement that is Black Lives of UUs made clear our mandate to become the anti-racist faith tradition we profess to want to be. The Black UUs in our movement pushed back, pulled back the curtain on some hard truths. We have work to do. We will not sleep through the revolution, as Reverend Dr. King so charged the UU General Assembly in 1966. Yes. Fifty years ago, he was the Ware Lecturer and he charged us: do not sleep through the revolution.

We cannot sleep through this revolution, Friends. No.

So here we are: landed on the anniversary of another revolution.

Fourth of July weekend comes with some ambiguity for religious liberals. This year we may be feeling even more ambiguous considering the political landscape the violence we have recently witnessed and continue to witness.

We may be asking ourselves and each other:

What have we become?

How is it that we have moved so far from,

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. ?

As it is so in 2016 so it was in 1776 when Thomas Paine wrote:

These are the times that try men's souls.

Women's souls, too.

In the midst of a war for independence, there were many who doubted both the cause and the fledging country's ability to achieve independence. To these people Paine said that,

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. The American Crisis – 1776

Born from this sentiment Sarah Vowell, began identifying herself as the “partly cloudy patriot” that she “longed not to be.” (This in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001)

I, too, want neither to be a sunshine nor a partly cloudy patriot. I want to live by my country's ideals especially when we seem to have lost our way. Just as we cannot sleep through the revolution, neither can we flee from it.

What does this have to do with us as people of faith? As religious liberals? As Unitarian Universalists? As the Souls who together create All Souls?

Everything.

Our country's deepest values are the values we hold as a faith tradition. Our Seven Principles are a reflection of American values. When we gathered last Wednesday night to talk with each other and our neighbors; when we gathered to learn from those who lead on issues with which we concern ourselves we do so because we care about our community and in the broader view, we care about our country.

We gathered with our neighbors because we are no sunshine patriots. We will not flee to Canada nor threaten to flee to Canada. (I saw an interesting post recently that named this threat that so many progressives throw around like so much confetti as actually the epitome of a uniquely American sense of privilege.)

No. We're going to stay right here in the midst of the struggle. We're going to show up to the community forums that have been born of the Orlando shooting because we are not sunshine patriots. We understand that after every great battle, there is a great storm.

We are not sunshine patriots for we see the whirling demons, full of rage and look them straight in the eye.

We witness the most excellent sun, the too-early stars breaking through by the work of our hearts, minds, and souls.

We are not sunshine patriots. We model love of country through love of our fellow Americans. Through acts of kindness and hospitality.

We are Americans. We understand that identity as a welcoming one. Whether you are a family from Syria fleeing the violence in your home country or whether you are from Mexico fleeing the economic violence in your home country, we welcome you home, here.

We are neither sunshine nor partly-cloudy patriots. We have gathered this morning in this place to restore hope and energy to then pour out to the world: our neighbors ... our country...

*to have the grace
to look up and out
and into our sister's eyes
and our brother's face –
our country
and say very simply
with hope –
Good morning.*

Maya Angelou (adapted from "On the Pulse of Morning")

Happy and meaningful Fourth of July, Friends.

Amen.