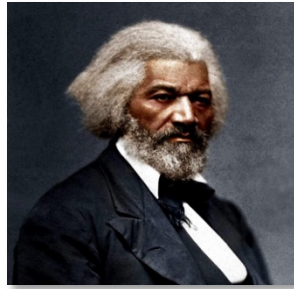


## “Patriotism In the Gap”

Rev. David Gregory

July 4, 2021

Pentecost 7



Frederick Douglass

### Readings

Judith 9:11-12 from the New Revised Standard Version



Judith  
August Riedel

“Your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on the powerful. But you are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, savior of those without hope. Please, please, God of my mother, God of my father, God of the heritage of Israel, Maker of heaven and earth, Creator of the waters, God of all your creation, hear my prayer!”

*The New Colossus* by Emma Lazarus

taken here from *How Lovely Are the Ruins: Inspirational Poems and Words for Difficult Times*

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “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-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”



I'd like to take this opportunity to wish everyone a happy Independence Day, which seems like a really good thing to do, since the 245<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence falls this year in our present moment, as we gather on this Sunday morning. At the risk of appearing "unpatriotic" to some, I will tell you honestly that my emotions around the phrase "Happy Independence Day" remain, as always, mixed, and I feel a sense of unease over the fraught condition of our nation which fought against all odds to free itself from Great Britain. The irony is that after nearly two and a half centuries, the struggle for independence continues, revealing some ugly truths about how we threw off the shackles of one oppressive empire only to create another.

I say this because of another anniversary, one that is actually tomorrow. On July 5, 1852, nearly a decade before the Civil War, at a gathering of abolitionists in Rochester, New York, Frederick Douglass delivered a scathing address entitled, "What To The Slave Is The Fourth of July?" I was reminded of this speech earlier this week when I heard a recording of some young descendants of Douglass reading excerpts from it. This led me to read the address in its entirety—something I had never done before, something that is hard to do—and there were at least two things that struck me. First was the scorching rhetoric, like:

*What, to the American slave, is your 4th 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. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.*

*Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?*

*I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.*

The second thing that strikes me about this speech is the timeless way that it speaks to a nation that, 169 years later, still struggles with the concept of liberty and justice for all. We can celebrate independence from Great Britain, but until that same independence is extended equally to everyone, our experiment with democracy remains incomplete. Yes, there was emancipation, but it was met with the backlash of the Jim Crow era. Yes, there was a civil rights movement that included a voting rights act, but it has been and is being met with a massive push toward voter suppression aimed at people of color. The rise of white supremacy, white nationalism, and racial injustice among us points to the fact that whatever we might

think we are celebrating today can't really be celebrated until we get there. And we'll never get there until we can close the huge gap that exists between the oppressor and the oppressed. You and I stand in that gap today as a group of people firmly committed to being an Open and Affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ, a place of extravagant welcome, a place where no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you can be welcomed. We know what this means in theory. This is a moment in history when our theory must become practice.

The apocryphal book of Judith tells the story of a Hebrew woman who single-handedly destroys an oppressive Assyrian king. She saw her people being oppressed, and she knew it was a huge wrong, and this was her prayer:

*Your strength does not depend on numbers, nor your might on the powerful. But you are the God of the lowly, helper of the oppressed, upholder of the weak, protector of the forsaken, savior of those without hope.*

But her theory became practice the moment she took the king's own sword and declared his head's independence from his body. This is not exactly a practice that I would recommend, but she looked at those who were oppressed and she looked at the oppressor, and she knew she had to act.

Jesus stood in the gap between the hungry peasants of the Judean countryside and the heavy oppressive hand of Rome, and it caused him to act. Harriet Tubman stood in the gap between slaves and their owners, and it caused her to act. Martin Luther King stood in the gap between systemic racism and those who were oppressed by it, and he had to act. As a country, there is a huge and obvious gap between the ideals expressed in the famous Emma Lazarus poem "The New Colossus" and our treatment of immigrants and refugees. In one direction we look and see this "Mother of Exiles," and in another we see a failed attempt at a border wall. You and I stand in this gap between them and we have to act. It cannot be done in a moment, or in a day, or even in a lifetime, but still we are called to act.

Last Sunday, Tripp and I were invited to a presentation in Marin City by the Griot Theater Company, a group of young people, whose artistic director, LeShawn Holcomb has been standing in the gap, and doing something very important in their behalf. The Company's mission statement says that they are a collective of artists, educators, and entrepreneurs committed to exploring, embracing, and amplifying brown and black culture through the arts. They see themselves as responsible for salvaging a culture that has fought to exist. As I looked around the room I was moved by the diversity of faces, cultures, and ages, as well as the unbridled joy in these young people and their project that transcended any differences that might otherwise exist. I saw our own Barb Killey among them, standing in the gap, seeing the disparities and doing something about them. We are living in one of the wealthiest, most beautiful, most privileged places on the face of the earth, and even here, the racial and economic disparities are so stunning and stark that the gap between the oppressor and the oppressed is inescapable. We all know it. We all see it. We all have an opportunity to act upon it. It is within our power to create a truly happy Independence Day, that is, when "liberty and justice" is for all.

