

July 4 and fireworks. They go hand-in-hand. I have seen and heard fireworks in many places, over a river, over a harbor, over a golf course, over a ball field. The colors are beautiful and dazzling! The company is usually enlivening, people chatting, and adding lots of oohs and aahs. Though I must admit, I have mixed feelings about the whole thing. Ask a firefighter in a dry season. Ask an emergency room doctor trying to re-attach fingers. Fireworks remind me of words in our national anthem: “and the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air.” July 4 quite simply reminds us of WAR. Pets instinctually cower and hide. People who have been in wars can have PTSD flashbacks. If you have lost friends and comrades in war, the sound of explosives will always be a sad, agonizing memory.

There can be no doubt that war itself is horrific, a nightmare for both those on the front lines of killing, and for those who lose loved ones. War is an example of what has been called (pardon the old-fashioned language) “man's inhumanity to man.” It is ever present in all of history. The Bible says it started with the first brothers, Cain and Abel. It is in our very nature to want to gain power at the expense of another, survival of the fittest, to be in power by the use of force. It is also in our nature and a necessity at times, to rebel with force, such as in the revolutionary war, the war of independence from Great Britain. The star spangled Banner, our national anthem, was actually written by Francis Scott Key during the war of 1812, because Great Britain was still an oppressive force against our merchant ships. Independence in 1776? Sure, but the great British Navy was still oppressing colonists for many years, so (we) had to fight back. After it was over in a Xmas Eve treaty of 1814, some historians say there was no substantial change in the relationship between our colonies and Great Britain! So it could be seen as a rather pointless war, as are many... someone starts firing and before you know it,

violence just breeds more violence. It is the cease fires and treaties, the negotiations and compromises that make the real progress after any armed conflict!

Am I anti-war? You bet, war should be always a very last resort! Was Jesus anti-war? You bet. You can't find any other meaning to his life, and his simple saying "Blessed are the peacemakers!" And when once he spoke of bringing a sword, it was a metaphorical reference to the sword of God's word and truth. Otherwise, he would have led an armed revolution against Roman oppression. Our gospel lesson this morning shows that Jesus did not influence and change things by use of force. In fact it says he could do no deeds of power in certain places, like his hometown. Whether for healing or to reinterpret Jewish societal laws, Jesus needed the cooperation, participation and investment of all recipients. The prophets also called for peacemaking. Every Christmas season, we read about the lion laying down with the lamb, people making war no more, and a little child leading them! And the apostle Paul, in this morning's letter to the Corinthians, is emphatic about his own weaknesses or flaws, that proves any influence he has is due to the power of God working in him, not to his own strength.

Which brings me back to one of my favorite phrases from our patriotic hymns. In "O beautiful for Spacious Skies," author Katharine Lee Bates asks that God "mend our every flaw!" And in the next verse asks that God "refine" our gold, and then asks that God "crown our good... with brotherhood!" It is not unpatriotic to say that God is not finished with us yet! It IS patriotic and loving one's country to ask that God keep refining us, that God "bless America", stand beside her and guide her!

We will sing at the end of the service a beautiful reinterpretation of this song by Miriam Therese Winter, penned 100 years later, reminding us of the

work we still need to do to in our beloved country. Quick preview: one of her lines is the call to “repent of the bloodshed through the years.” So many of our wars have been too long, with too much bloodshed, for too little change in actual relationships and boundaries. Yes, we are glad to get out of places like Viet Nam and Afghanistan. And to live into the beauty of our country, Miriam Therese Winter makes an “inclusive call” for harmony: Inclusive of “indigenous and immigrant, our daughters and our sons: may we never rest content till all are truly one... May we be a nation blessed with none oppressed!”

Surely as we promote democratic rule across the *world*, we must work at being more inclusive of ourselves in this country. We don't want to hear any more stories of oppression and beatings and killings of Jews, Blacks, Asians, Muslims, or anyone else due to their race or creed. As followers of Christ, we want to be at the forefront of peacemaking, trying to understand and value all people. July 4 is naturally a celebration of freedom...(first from the oppressive trade rules of Great Britain), but also freedom from any forces of oppression, AND freedom to be and to become the best of who we can be... freedom to be uniquely ourselves.

I'll close with an example of one who I think has done very well in following a higher road of respecting and learning from people of other cultures. I often follow Rick Steeves on Channel 2 and 11! So impressed with his knowledge and perpetual learning about peoples and cultures, I recently got his book called “Travel as a political act.” In our city of Newburyport, we are somewhat homogeneous, and a family sometimes has to show up on the front cover of Newburyport magazine for us to realize that we actually do have Muslim neighbors, and that the vast majority of Muslims are not extremists nor terrorists, just as the vast majority of Christians do not glorify

the Crusades nor the KuKluxKlan burning crosses! We recall that the word Islam is closely related to the word Peace, as in Salaam or Shalom. Listen to one of Rick's reflections about Islam: "While violent Islamic fundamentalists represent a tiny fraction of all Muslims, and the threats they pose are real, to help balance my understanding of Islam, I make a point to travel and learn about its reasonable main stream side... While the call to prayer sounds spooky to many Americans, I find that with some understanding, it becomes beautiful. My challenge is to hear the Muslim call to prayer as a beautiful form of praise that sweeps across the globe five times a day" (how many Christians stop to pray five times a day?).

So on this Independence Day, on this day of liberty with justice for all, on this day to celebrate that "all men are created equal," let's continue to throw off, to banish any form of tyranny , any form of oppression, any form of slavery or racism ... not only in our attitudes, but in our civil laws and systems. All of this takes real work, negotiation and compromise from our lawmakers. As people of faith, we add prayer! As our songs say: God, Bless America!, Mend our every flaw! Refine our gold! Stand beside her! And Guide her! Dear God, please Bless America! ... Help us to love as Jesus taught: to love our neighbor as ourself... the neighbor in our community, the neighbor in other states, the neighbors in the other Americas, Central and South America, the neighbor who was here first, native to this land, the neighbor who has immigrated from another country, another culture. God, Bless America with the power of your inclusive Love!