

## Sermon Notes: July 2, 2023

Focus: July 4<sup>th</sup>

## Lectionary Readings

I grew up setting off fireworks at my uncle's sprawling property outside of Tulsa. I knew we were celebrating American independence, but I measured success by the number of exploded firecrackers. It boggles my mind now, but we thought it would be a good idea to take the fireworks (pictured at the right), cut them into sections of five rounds, tape them to our forehands "Wolverine" style (also pictured), and then run into the woods and try to shoot each other with these redneck rockets and lighters.



That was the extent of my youthful patriotism: more explosions = more America. By the time I made it to high school, my hand was over my heart at every game during the national anthem. College was the first time I heard or believed anything besides full-throated, unquestioning patriotism. My collegiate cynicism would tip into despair during the first Gulf War with rumors of drafts everywhere.

My muscular patriotism came back after 9/11. I even flirted with enlisting. I had never been in the custom of flying an American flag, but I did then. Yet, as one September stacked onto another, my cynicism would creep back in. The more I learned about our history, the more I felt complicit with extreme violence in our national story.

Over the last 10-15 years: I am not back to my unquestioning exuberance, but I have come to believe in values we *say* we believe in and want to find a way for us to practice what we preach.

*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.*

My cynical side wants to laugh out loud at the brazen hypocrisy of the founder's holding slaves while writing these words. I know it was a different time, but even in context, they had to have felt the cognitive dissonance.

I still stand for the flag and still sing the national anthem. But I sing for the country I want us to become-- not who we regularly, painfully, shockingly are. My patriotism strains forward, and occasionally glances backward to mourn. My sermon will be an attempt to synthesize our readings with a sense of joy and hope for America. I hope we can cherish how these scripture readings are perfectly suited for us two days before July 4<sup>th</sup>.

On page 2, I include the intro to Nikole Hannah-Jones' 1619 project. You may know her for 1619's notoriety and her academic career at UNC, but I share her work (in part) because of the story she tells about her father. Her dad inspires me to be a little more patriotic in the way he was patriotic.

**Nikole Hannah-Jones** excerpt from [1619](#) podcast, episode 1  
(starting at 5mins and 50 secs)

When I was a child, my dad always flew a flag in our front yard. Our house is on a corner lot, and in the front yard right in the corner was this — I couldn't tell you how tall it was. It always seemed really garishly tall to me at the time. There was this very tall aluminum flagpole. My parents didn't make a lot of money, so our house always had paint chipping, and there was always something about the house that was in disarray.

You know, the grass was looking disheveled or the railing on the stairs was falling off, but the flag was always pristine. As soon as it started to show even the slightest tatter, my dad would replace the flag with a fresh new flag. He would never allow a tattered flag to fly. And I didn't understand it. I didn't know other black kids whose parents were flying a flag in their front yard. I know lots of white people who flew flags — lots of white people who flew flags.

My dad was born on a sharecropping farm in Greenwood, Mississippi, where his family picked cotton in the same cotton fields that enslaved people had picked cotton not too long before. That county, Leflore County in Mississippi, lynched more black people than any other county in Mississippi, and Mississippi lynched more black people than any other state in the country. So it was a pretty devastatingly violent and hard place to live.

My dad's mom fled the South like millions of other black people during the Great Migration and came north to Waterloo and found many of the same barriers that she had sought to escape. She was forced to buy a house on the black side of town. Most jobs were unavailable to her, so she cleaned white people's houses. My father went to segregated schools.

And at a young age, my father joined the military so that he could get his way out of poverty, but also for the reasons that so many black people join the military, which is he hoped that if he served his country, his country might finally see him as an American.

He loved being in the Army. He was stationed in Germany, picked up German very quickly. He was so smart. He loved talking about that time. It was a period where he got to see things that a poor black child born in Mississippi would not normally get to see.

But the military didn't end up being a way out for my dad for long. He was passed up for opportunities, and the only jobs my dad ever worked were service jobs. He worked as a convenience store clerk or a bus driver. And because of that, this big, pristine American flag flying in the front of our yard was deeply embarrassing to me. And I didn't understand why he would feel that much love for a country that clearly did not love him.

I felt this way all through high school. I was no longer standing for the national anthem. I had stopped saying the Pledge of Allegiance. And really, throughout most of my adult life — I mean, clearly I know I'm an American. I was born here. Every family member for generations back that I know were all born here, but I never felt like I could claim fully that I was an American.

But it wasn't until I really started researching and reading and thinking about this project that my own thinking started to shift, that I realized my dad understood things that I never knew. I now understand for the first time why my dad was so proud to fly that flag.

I really appreciate his hard-earned patriotism and hope it was as helpful to you as it was to me.

**Todd**