

Proper 9 Year C 2025

Friday was the Fourth of July, Independence Day; the celebration of the birth of our democratic republic. Some of my fondest childhood memories occurred during the Fourth of July holiday which we celebrated each year at our family beach place in Panama City. The house was always full of people. The Stuarts from Birmingham; and then a random friend or two, or three from school. We slept all over the house; two to each bed; on the swinging cots on the sprawling porch. My brother Taylor was always in charge of the flag. He would ceremoniously unfold it, affix it to its staff, and march with decorum to the end of our dock where he would mount it in the brackets on one of the pilings. Just after dark, our entire family, and our guests, and random families from the neighborhood, would process out onto the dock to get a better view of the fireworks being launched from the city marina. There would be hundreds of boats on the bay, their bow lights glittering on the dark water like fireflies. Among the constellations of our southern sky, Orion presided... gallant, stoic... the Pleiades, the seven sisters, huddled in mysterious sorority; Polaris, the North Star, in its rightful place bearing witness to this celebration of liberty and justice for all. I so miss those naïve years.

American democracy has always been called an experiment, but it was much more than that. It was a collective vision... a vision of a just and egalitarian way of life; a vision powered by the passionate conviction of its citizens. It was a lofty ideal, a utopian dream, envisioned by the framers of the Constitution who borrowed from the Enlightenment philosophies of John Locke, Voltaire, and Rousseau... who borrowed from

Plato, Plotinus, and Cicero. The goal of course was equality, liberty, freedom, and individual dignity... a secular salvation, if you will. The hope, of course, was that humanity had the capacity, and the imagination to manage its common life under the rubric of, not just freedom, but of responsibility, and not least of all... justice.

But alas, despite what we learned in grammar school, despite the popular national narrative, the dream was broken from the very beginning. The phrase that “all men are created equal” applied literally only to men, not the collective noun meaning humankind, but “men” by gender, and in particular, white men. Women were denied a voice in government, nor could they vote; our African American brothers and sisters were enslaved; Native Americans were routed and deported to uninhabitable lands; Chinese and Irish immigrants consigned to a lower rung of the social hierarchy. Violence has been our calling card. Manifest Destiny was the coinage referring to the conquering of most of North America. The revolving handgun, America’s first automatic weapon, patented by Samuel Colt, so effective in the western expansion of the United States, became, and still remains, a symbol of our culture. Underneath it all, the allurements to America, was its wealth.... Wealth, the powerful and insatiable false god.

There were shining moments of our democracy to be sure: The abolishment of slavery; women’s suffrage; the new Deal; civil rights; marriage equality; an economy, stable and rich in resources; but now the proverbial chickens are coming home to roost. Our sins of the past are visited upon us. The dream of a just society, a society of equals,

is being undermined by our addictions; our addictions being: self-interest, greed, xenophobia. Our elected representatives are inured to nameless corporations whose sole purpose is profit. The vote, our sacred right and duty, is being compromised. Voter suppression is a clear and present danger; and who knows how reliable digital voting will become under the auspices of big Tech? The Republican Party has now given itself over to treachery and deception attempting to form an autocratic form of government. A post-constitutional society, they call it.

What the founders worried about the most, was tyranny, and now since 2016 it has raised its menacing head for all to see. The Supreme Court, the third branch of government, the last stop in our system of checks and balances, has gone rogue, doing the bidding of the autocracy, undermining and violating the very principles and precedents of the rule of law. We are in trouble, good people; our democracy is in trouble. What has happened to us?

Like all empires, we sold our soul long ago to wealth and power, and the love of wealth and power breeds injustice, and injustice begets violence. The wise among us, over our brief history, have warned us about our economic system of unregulated Capitalism. The new post-constitutional order now considers its citizens pawns in a vast, economic hierarchy; a hierarchy in which the top 5% hold 80 percent of the wealth. Behind the lofty democratic ideals of our country since its beginning, profit and wealth have always driven us... but now, the unchecked pursuit of profit and wealth have

become doctrine. Andy Doyle, bishop of the Diocese of Texas, observes that our political system is no longer about left versus right. Now it is about choosing what we worship... Is our allegiance to God and the greater good; or is our allegiance to wealth and power? This struggle, this tragedy is nothing new. Such is the way of empire, democratic or otherwise. And we all know, if we read history, that all empires fail and fall. They are unsustainable.

Empires are the constructs of patriarchy, which according to anthropologist Rene Girard, is nine thousand years in the making. Patriarchal rule emerged in seven thousand B.C.E. at the demise of matrilineal culture. There is no empire in recorded history that wasn't founded, or deposed, by violence. Think on that. Our means are our ends in the making.

Patriarchy, with its predisposition to violence, still rules the world, despite the empowerment of women over the last century... and it is lashing out with the complicity of the United States.... in Iran, in Ukraine, in Gaza... and here at home. Violence has many faces besides warfare. Over the last 90 days we have witnessed the unprecedented, systematic dismantling of our democratic way of life. Profit now has priority over the lives of our citizens. Snap benefits... food for the poor... its funding slashed; and it now must be earned as recipients have to be employed, assuming there are jobs. Medicaid benefits have been denied to some 12,000,000 people, 200,000 of whom live in the state of Alabama; Foreign aid, our legacy as a responsible steward of

the world's need, has all but been eliminated. Our liberal education system is under siege.... The regime wants indoctrination, instead of discovery and the art of critical thinking... the new immigration budget is billions more than preceding years; massive enough whereby the government can, without due process, police the entire nation. Cruelty is now the means. Cruelty begets fear and control. The Capitalist monster slouches towards the American city on a hill. It is all in the plan that has been smoldering, evolving since our very founding. The architects of this new order call it a "golden age." "Golden" indeed. What shall we ever do? What does it mean now to love our country?

Despite the vast differences in culture and context, the Gospel writers are in the same boat as us. Their world, like ours, was occupied by tyranny, and the poverty and violence and marginalization that comes with it. The Gospel writers following the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth are offering another way. The True way; a way that stands against the tyranny of empire; not by the means of empire, of violence or coercion; but by the means of Love. It is a revolution, a renewal of Spirit, as it were, spiritual revolution that might ramify into the social, economic and political fabric of our world. As Reinhold Niebuhr put it, "God's dream for the world is Love... and the means of Love is justice;" not just legal justice, though that is critical, but living justly; that is to say, living lives of empathy; welcoming the stranger and the outcast; living generously; practicing kindness; calling on our compassion; sacrificing for the greater good. And

according to Luke, we do that collaboratively. Two by two, he says. We are stronger in community. There is agency in community.... Agency, an important word... which according to the American Heritage Dictionary means “the means or mode of acting instrumentally.” As the people of God, our presence in the world is instrumental for its transformation.

In today’s reading Jesus sends out the seventy, two by two. Seventy, that should get our attention. It’s the same number of elders commissioned by Moses in the Sinai desert. Seven are the number of days God created the heavens and the earth according to Genesis. Sabbaticals in Jewish culture, when debts were forgiven, happened every seven years. Seventy the number of elders in Alexandria that translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek. This is a number ubiquitous in Jewish mysticism. Something is moving. Luke is using the typology of the tradition to speak of God’s alchemy; that when we go into the world two by two, travelling light; when we are present, proximate to the world’s brokenness, when Love is present and proximate, carried by our very bodies, then things change, perhaps not in our time, but in God’s time. But know this, God’s kingdom is fully present in our very proximity to the world’s ruin. That is the promise. An iota of Love given, even a singular, mundane act, has exponential grace for the ones receiving it. I’ll say it again, one act of Love redeems and transforms the world beyond our imagining....

Brothers and sisters, the world will never be set right. There is no Utopia at the end of things, but we can be the heart of God in a broken world. The presence of Love gives light and life even in the face of fear and despair, even in the dark and surveilled streets of our world. Love is not reserved for the future. Love is for now. That is why Jesus can say that the kingdom of God is not a future event, an eschatological reality, but that the kingdom of God is now. It is now because we Love now. We go out two by two to the places and to the people Jesus intended to go. There is no better example of Incarnation than that. We go as the raised body of Christ, which is to simply say, we go with Love for our neighbor in our hearts and souls. We will find allies, by the way. We will know them by their hospitality, according to Luke. I find that hopeful, comforting, noble. We cannot know the ends of things, nor shall we fear the ends...There is shalom, God's improbable Peace, along the way. Dear friends, we can live the means of God's Kingdom, manifest in each and every community gathered; we can live the means as citizens of the kingdom of God, our true native land... and who knows, we may see the powers and principalities, the cruel reign of empire fall like lightning.... And one day, someday, there will be liberty, freedom, and justice for all.