

“Pursuing Oneness”
 Acton Congregational Church (ACC)
 04 July 2021
 Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Psalm 1
 Mark 6:1-13

“Then Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.’”

– Mark 6:4

Prayer
Living God,
We are grateful for the freedom we have to gather in-person again
As well as to continue to worship you virtually.
Open our hearts to your Word
And startle us once again with the truth of the Gospel.
May this sacred time of meditation
Inspire us, discomfort us, nurture our faith and prepare us
To live God’s love in the world.
In Christ and through Christ, we pray. Amen.

On a steamy summer day while scattered thunderstorms were rolling through Philadelphia, the delegates to the Second Continental Congress made the extraordinary decision to approve the motion that would forever split the 13 American colonies from the British Empire. John Adams, one of the most ardent proponents of the independence from England, was elated even as he remained clear-eyed about the real costs and monumental consequences of the vote cast on July 2nd, 1776. There was no question in his heart and mind that the delegates were creating not only a new nation, but a new future of peaceful freedom for millions of unborn Americans.¹ So certain was Adams of the absolute rightness of the declaration of American independence that he spoke about freedom as the cause of all nations justifiable in the sight of God and all humanity.²

On July 3rd, still overcome with a profound sense of excitement mixed with awe, John Adams poured out his feelings about the momentous vote for independence in a letter to his beloved wife Abigail. He wrote, ***“The second day of July 1776 will be the most memorable epocha in the history of America. I am apt to believe that it will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival. It ought to be commemorated as the Day of Deliverance by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty. It ought to be solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations from one end of this continent to the other from this time forward forever more.”***³

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Americans, as it turned out, chose to memorialize not the vote on July 2nd as Adams had predicted, but the day when the Continental Congress approved the final draft of the document Thomas Jefferson prepared declaring the United States as an independent country among the nations. July 4th became the great festival day that Adams had envisioned. And today, as it has happened on every 4th of July, Americans are marking this national anniversary festival with backyard cookouts, barbecue at the park, epic sales, parades, games, shows, concerts and fireworks. Thanks to science and the availability of the vaccines, we can also gather in person in our sanctuary for the first time since March of 2020.

So let me take a minute to say to you as your Senior Minister that I am grateful that I can finally see at least some of you in person today. For 15 months, I stood here facing an empty sanctuary, trying my best to connect with you through cameras, and praying for the day when we would gather again in our sanctuary. That day has finally come! I am delighted that we can be together in our sacred space. I give thanks for all of you who are able to be here in person on this July 4th as well as for our church members and friends who continue to join us remotely. Thank you for making the time today to observe this festival day that defines the character of our nation with this holy act of worship and devotion to the Almighty God.

John Adams was a devout Christian who believed wholeheartedly that the hand of God was involved in the birth of this new nation of liberty and human equality, but he wasn't blind to the irony that enveloped the words Thomas Jefferson wrote into the Declaration of Independence. His heart and mind were set ablaze by the grand and daring ideals of the country's founding document. Adams shared Jefferson's conviction that all human beings are equal in the eyes of the Creator and that life, freedom and the pursuit of happiness are at the core of all human aspirations. On the other hand, John Adams knew quite well that the document that gave birth to the nation misrepresented the truth on the ground. Abigail, his own wife, questioned the passion for liberty in the hearts of those who were accustomed to depriving enslaved Africans of theirs.⁴ In London, the British greeted the American independence ideals of liberty and equality with sarcasm wondering how slave holders could possibly declare that all men are created equal.⁵ As a person of faith, Adams understood perhaps better than anyone else that the nation would be born with the thorn of white superiority in its flesh and that behind the 4th-of-July-celebrations would remain an alarming dissonance between the brutal reality of slavery and racism and the God-inspired dreams of human freedom and equality.

It took nearly a century, the horror of the civil war and the tragic assassination of a president for America to begin to confront the tension lurking behind the 4th of July and experience what many historians define as the nation's "Second Founding." At Gettysburg, in one of the darkest moments of American history, Abraham Lincoln acknowledged that the noble dream of a nation "***dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal***"⁶ was still an unfinished work. Lincoln's vision of a "***new birth of freedom***"⁷ for the country angered white nationalists who made sure the president

would not live to bring his hope for a bi-racial America to life. But Lincoln's vision and poetic words delivered at Gettysburg lived on in the heart and mind of a Republican representative from Ohio whose name, I confess, I had never heard until a few months ago.

John Bingham, who is known as one of America's "**Founding Sons**,"⁸ dedicated his entire political life to making the 4th of July into more than just an unreachable ideal of liberty and equality. Bingham refused to leave the issue of slavery untouched, as the Founding Fathers had done, for the sake of national unity. To those who would tell him that America was not ready to free the enslaved Blacks, Bingham would offer a simple answer, "**[t]he time never was and never can be unpropitious for an honest endeavor to do right.**"⁹

The late Rev. William Sloane Coffin once said, "**There are three kind of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover's quarrel with their country, a reflection of God's lover's quarrel with all the world.**"¹⁰ Bingham was without a doubt a "good patriot." He was proud of what the Founding generation had accomplished. In a lecture at Franklin College, his Alma Mater, Bingham spoke eloquently about both the revolution and the Republic. "[A]**nterior to our sublime Declaration of Independence,**" Bingham stated, "**anterior to that great day when on the last battlefield of the Revolution, the young Republic was dedicated in a baptism of fire and blood to freedom and to man, there was not anywhere upon the globe, a state, which by its fundamental law recognized the political equality of the human race.**"¹¹ But Bingham was also very much willing to name and denounce the political and social wrongs that plagued and haunted America. Slavery and racism, he argued, turned the nation conceived by the dreams of liberty into a "**bastard democracy**" that disenfranchised non-whites.¹² He railed against the system of racial oppression that, in Bingham's own words, "**fetters the spirit which God made to be free, to aspire, not to crawl, to hope, not to despair.**"¹³ In protest against Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, President Andrew Jackson and many other influential Americans of his time who insisted that the government should stay in the hands of white men because Blacks, they contended, were "**inferior beings altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social and political relations,**"¹⁴ Bingham stated, "[The] **principle which informs this Constitution of ours and makes up its very vitality, is the political equality of the human race, a full recognition of the truth, that God has made of one blood all nations of men.**"¹⁵ Bingham made absolutely no apology for slavery or systemic racism. He was fully committed to the spirit of equality, which he argued, was already imbedded in the Constitution. On the floor of the House of Representatives, Bingham said that he was fighting for a country where "**[It] is not to be inquired... when any man invokes the majesty of American law in defense of his rights, whether a European, an African, an Asiatic sun looked down upon him when it pleased God to put the first beam of light upon his understanding. Before that great law the only question to be asked of the creature claiming its protection is this: Is he a man?**"¹⁶

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There was no question in Bingham's mind that if the American people were serious about striving to form a more perfect union, poetic words and aspirational speeches about freedom and equality would not be enough. He was well-aware of the limitations of the Constitution to secure the fundamental rights of Black Americans at a time when Blacks, freed or enslaved, were not even considered citizens of the United States. It was clear that "**a new birth of freedom**" would be impossible without a constitutional amendment that enshrined the universal promise of human equality in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence in the U.S. Constitution and applied Madison's Bill of Rights to all the States. In the 1860's, this kind of constitutional thinking was both radical and revolutionary!

Against all odds and great opposition, John Bingham worked tirelessly to craft an amendment that would recognize and secure citizenship and equality before the law to all persons in America, whether Black or white, natural born or naturalized citizens, resident aliens or even strangers. On July 9th, 1868 – ninety-two years after the Second Continental Congress approved the resolution to proclaim independence from Great Britain and Thomas Jefferson gifted the nations of the world with the dream of human equality, the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified and America experienced a rebirth.

Constitutional scholars say that the Fourteenth Amendment redefined how Americans think about what it means to be an American. The values and rights that make us proudest of America – citizenship, which someone defined as "**the right to have rights**," equal protection under the law, and due process to all people regardless of race, gender, color, religion or political views come from John Bingham's passion for the fundamental God-given equality and freedom of the human race. Gerard Magliocca, a professor at the Indiana University School of Law who wrote the only biography of John Bingham, noted that the text and the language of the Fourteenth Amendment are the most relevant in the Constitution. Bingham's amendment has been used by the Supreme Court "**to desegregate the public schools, end discrimination against women, establish equal voting rights... find the right to sexual privacy**"¹⁷ and to guarantee marriage equality in America. John Bingham is the man who wrote the word "equal" into the Constitution and made the promise of July 4th more real for millions of people who had been excluded from the American dream.

English writer and lay theologian G.K. Chesterton was right when he said that saints are the medicine that every country needs because saints fight against the sickness that ails society. For that very reason, saints are often mistaken for a poison, when in truth they are the antidote most needed. "**Therefore it is the paradox of history that each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most.**"¹⁸

John Bingham never aspired to be a saint even though his Presbyterian upbringing had instilled in him an unwavering faith in Christ and in God's love for all persons. The anti-slavery sentiment and the determination to imbed the American creed that all human beings are equal into the Constitution reflected Bingham's deeply held

Christian conviction that systemic racism, injustice and oppression must not go on unchallenged in our country. John Bingham never conflated Christianity with nationalism, but his Christian faith was the driving power behind his impassioned commitment to extend American citizenship to non-whites, secure the blessings of equality under the law for all Americans and move the nation a little closer to the 4th-of-July-promise. He believed the spirit of Christianity was embodied in the Fourteenth Amendment¹⁹ and offered it to the nation as an antidote to the pathology of white supremacy that he thought corrupts the greatness of America. Bingham was a good patriot who quarreled with the nation over its reluctance to affirm the political freedom and equality of Black Americans. Throughout his imperfect public life, John Bingham contradicted his culture by standing against white supremacy and by refusing to look away from the thorn of white superiority in the side of the nation. America's "Founding Son" and the Father of the Fourteenth Amendment was able to convert the great ideals and dreams of the nation's founding into a constitutional amendment and change how we define America, but John Bingham died in poverty and forgotten. As Jesus said to the people in his hometown, "***Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.***"

I believe the evangelists preserved the story of Jesus' rejection by his own faith community in the gospels to prepare the Church for our challenging mission to announce a truth the people closest to us would rather not hear. Nazareth was a wake-up call for Jesus! The Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus was completely caught off-guard by the rejection he experienced in Nazareth. He was unprepared to minister to people who did not want to see or hear or believe anything that unsettled their worldview. On that Sabbath day in Nazareth, Jesus realized perhaps for the first time in his ministry that it is not easy to offer new insights to a faith community that is hardened against anyone who questions their traditions and is suspicious of any person who speaks about uncomfortable truths. But the suspicion, resentment and outright rejection he faced among people of faith taught Jesus an invaluable lesson. He realized that there will always be people who take offense when the Gospel conflicts with their personal biases and the stories they like to tell about themselves. There will always be people who resent the saint that contradicts their culture and religion. There will always be people in our faith communities, in the church, that accuse the antidote of being a poison.

I have been alarmed by the opposition, especially among white Christians, to Critical Race Theory. Good patriots like Bingham would undoubtedly agree that it is important to be historically literate and to have a fuller understanding about the ways racism influences our country's history. CRT does not promise a theological or religious antidote to racism, it simply states that white supremacy and racism are not just a problem that afflicts the individual but a reality that infects our whole society, including our institutions, legal system and even the Church. Surprisingly, recent surveys show that white Evangelical, Catholic and Mainline Protestant Christians are consistently more likely than whites that are religiously unaffiliated to decry Critical Race Theory as a poison and a threat to our national unity. White Christians as a whole are also more

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likely to say that the killing of Black men are isolate incidents rather than a pattern of anti-Black racism, to deny the existence of systemic racism in America and support restrictions on voting rights.²⁰ As the great American journalist Bill Moyers said so wisely, many White Christians are still fighting the oldest war known to humankind, which Adams, Jefferson, Washington, and all the delegates to the Second Continental Congress also fought, the war between the self and the truth, between what we know and how we live.²¹

There is growing pressure from White Christians, especially among Evangelical and conservative Catholics, to make the whole country into uncritical lovers of our nation; but Christ calls on us to engage the Church and our country with the same lover's quarrel that inspired John Bingham to take a clear stand against slavery and racism for the sake of life, justice, liberty and equality. The Fourteenth Amendment took us several steps closer to what makes us proudest of America, but there still remains a lot to be done to make a nation dedicated to the proposition that all human beings are created equal to live up to the promise of the 4th of July. Like America's "Founding Son," those of us gathered here for this act of worship and devotion to God have to decide whether we will pretend that we do not see the thorn of racism in our country's side for the sake of national unity or if we will contradict the prevailing sentiment among white Christians and pursue the powerful dream of a more perfect union grounded in the radical equality of all human beings.

On the day President Joe Biden signed the historic bill that made Juneteenth into a federal holiday, Rev. James Forbes, the pastor emeritus of the Riverside Church in New York City, wrote a poem entitled "*All Americans Together*" to celebrate the joy of freedom and to invite all of us to face the reality of the still unfinished work of the 4th of July. Here are a few lines from his poem:

***"We must decide the convictions we will embrace
Regarding the shameful brutalities of race.
If matters to you to have truth on your side
Racism in this nation cannot be denied..."***

***When all of God's children can finally breathe freely
We can celebrate being a true democracy.
Imagine the joy and the light we will share
When we recover the oneness already there."***²²

John Bingham's faith, I have no doubts, allowed him to see the oneness of the human race that is already there and gave him the courage to devote his life to enshrining this universal truth into the Fourteenth Amendment. I haven't quoted the first section of the amendment that Bingham wrote so I invite you to take some time today or during the week to read it. Perhaps you will be inspired to read his biography by Gerard Magliocca and remember the man who gave the country a new birth of freedom and equality. I hope that Bingham's words and life will inspire you, much like Christ inspired

him, to contradict anyone who says that racism is not an American problem and still make you love America so you will dare to pursue the oneness of the human race given by God, our Creator.

The story goes that in 1787, after the Constitutional Convention, an anxious lady named Mrs. Powell approached Benjamin Franklin outside of the great hall and asked, ***“What type of government have you delegates given us?”*** Franklin replied, ***“A republic, madam, if you can keep it.”***²³

If Mrs. Powell had stopped John Bingham in 1868 and asked him what Congress created with the Fourteenth Amendment, Bingham would have probably answered, ***“A multi-cultural, pluralist representative democracy, madam, if Americans are willing to work hard enough to be a true democracy and pursue the oneness that is already there.”***

I hope you and I will be good patriots like John Bingham and maybe even saints who will do everything to pursue the oneness that is already there so that, with God’s help, we may keep this multicultural republic alive and thriving.

Happy 4th of July.

¹ David McCullough in John Adams, p. 126 [Kindle Edition].

² Ibid., p. 129. See also Letter to Francis Dana, 18 April 1781 in Papers of John Adams, volume 11, Adams Papers Digital Edition, Massachusetts Historical Society [<https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-06-11-02-0201>].

³ David McCullough in John Adams, p. 129 [Kindle Edition].

⁴ Ibid., p. 132.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Abraham Lincoln in The Gettysburg Address, 19 November 1863, Abraham Lincoln Online, Speeches and Writings [<http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>]

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gerard N. Magliocca in American Founding Son, p. 1 [Kindle Edition].

⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁰ William Sloane Coffin. *“Credo,”* p. 84.

¹¹ Gerard N. Magliocca in American Founding Son, p. 35 [Kindle Edition].

¹² Ibid., p. 140.

¹³ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 139.

¹⁷ Gerard N. Magliocca in American Founding Son, p. 2 [Kindle Edition].

¹⁸ Rutler Azar and George Marlin, editors. G.K. Chesterton in Collected Works: St. Francis, The Everlasting Man, St. Thomas Aquinas, Volume II, p. 424.

¹⁹ Gerard N. Magliocca in American Founding Son, p. 125 [Kindle Edition].

²⁰ By Robert P. Jones in White Christians are consistently more likely than whites who are religiously unaffiliated to deny the existence of structural racism, THINK, 27 July 2020 [<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/racism->

among-white-christians-higher-among-nonreligious-s-no-coincidence-
ncna1235045?fbclid=IwAR0bP6WIXR3575Xf5CkOKTDT82KfXkzol7bwnE5jFGmJ9_wnsneDIIzveMU].

²¹ Bill Moyers Essay: On July 4th, 29 June 2009.

²² Rev. James Forbes in All Americans Together, 17 June 2021.

²³ Walter Isaacson in Benjamin Franklin, p. 459 [Kindle Edition].