
Inter-Dependence Day 2021

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 9 – Year B**

***May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and our redeemer.***

A friend of mine told me recently that she's getting married later this year. And that reminded me of a funny thing I've heard about making wedding plans. It's kind of an open secret, or a Murphy's law; but it's specific to wedding planning. Maybe you've heard it too. It goes like this: No matter how far ahead of your wedding date you start planning your wedding, it really comes together only in the last month. That's right: you can get a good running start, say 6 months before the wedding date, or 12, or 18. Whatever. Start as early as you like. It won't matter, because it's really those last 30 days when everything that needs to happen, really happens!

Well, that remark has been on my mind for another reason recently. Some of you know that I've been writing a book for more than 25 years now. But what you would *not* know is that after working on it for a year and a half during our pandemic I've given myself about 25 more *days*; 25 more days to finish a presentable draft that I can show to a publisher. That's right, by the end of this month I want to put a benchmark or milestone on that project.

Now I've set myself a challenging timetable, as you can imagine. That's because I'm funneling more than 25 years of drafts and notes and false starts and revisions into a manageable manuscript that will show-up irresistible to an editor. Just like beholding a bride processing up to the altar on her wedding day: like hearing my favorite Stevie Wonder song that we played at my own wedding reception years ago, right here at St. Philips in the parish hall: "Isn't she lovely!" I want a reviewer to hear playing in the background after browsing my submission. That's the way I want my project to shine!

But why the next 25 days? It's because I'm planning to take some vacation time beginning in August, after almost 18 months being shut-in during our pandemic. Now I'm vaccinated and wannabe be 'footloose and fancy free;' ready to 'get out of Dodge' and enjoy me some vacation. So I've given myself these next 25 days to have a manuscript in hand that I can show to a publisher before I leave town.

Now that means I need your prayers! For the next 4 weeks until the end of the month especially, keep me on your private prayer list, okay? Just the way you would for any anxious bride or bridegroom, right? You can pray, 'Help him, Holy Ghost, help him, Lord Jesus!' Or as we used to say in Black church tradition, 'Prop him up on every leaning side!'—meaning 'If he leans too far on one side, straighten him up in that direction; and if he leans too much on the other side, straighten him up in the other direction. 'Help him, Holy Ghost,' I want you to pray, 'right where and when he can't help himself.'

And that brings me on a direct route to our scripture readings appointed for today. Two passages stand out in particular, one from the epistle reading in 2 Corinthians, and the other from the gospel reading in Mark. A key verse from each of those readings has been speaking to me about my writing, on the one hand. But those same verses, as you're about to hear, are also calling to me about our Independence Day observance this weekend. Let's see what you think: beyond how those verses apply to me individually with my project on the one hand. More importantly, how may they apply to us collectively as a nation observing our Independence anniversary in this year 2021?

So let's connect here with the apostle writing in 2nd Corinthians. After years of *not* being healed from an

affliction, despite his many prayers, Paul tells us that he heard God say to him: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness . . . Therefore,” Paul goes on to say in that final verse that jumps off the page— “Therefore,” he declares, making that audacious declaration that ends the reading:

Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:9, 10)

Now you may already know this, and even if you haven’t thought about it much it makes sense. My people—meaning here my African American people—well, we have a complicated relationship to the Fourth of July. Especially after just making Juneteenth a national holiday, it’s clear that gaining freedom—for us—has not been a direct route for us as a people. But that’s where our scripture readings inform our faith. Year after year Paul prayed for a healing that appears never to have happened in real time. But our ancestors prayed generation after generation for an end to slavery that finally did happen. And yet the same scripture can be applied in each case. As Black Christians we may affirm the same meaning that the apostle declared, that ‘God’s power is perfected in our weakness.’

Now on this point we may just as well admit it: That about the most un-American thing you can say on the Fourth of July. ‘Power made perfect in weakness?’ What? Especially on this anniversary day, we pride ourselves on being among the most powerful people in history. To hear otherwise sounds almost like blaspheming against our civil religion! You know: that secularized religion where we worship, most of all, ourselves being United States Americans. Especially given our national narcissism, how can a spirituality of ‘power made perfect in weakness’ be viable for us as a nation? Must not a nation show unchallenged strength and power all the time? Or how can a nation yield itself the way the apostle commends us to be content as individual Christians, when he coaches us that ‘for the sake of Christ we can be content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities? How can that kind of weakness be advisable or desirable or commendable to a nation?

Well, Christian friends and friends of Christ, we people of faith claim that that kind of redemptive weakness happens again and again. We’ve seen it happen time after time. It happens when we are so weak we realize that we are not sufficient for the task at hand. It’s then that we may begin to cast about for other powers, or for a Higher Power, to do for us precisely what we cannot do ourselves. Yes, we’ve seen cases where that’s what happens! Some of us claim that’s what happened in our Civil War here in the United States and in our Civil Rights movement in the last century.

Just when the nation lay prostrate, divided and torn asunder by warring divisions and dissent, just then enduring breakthroughs occurred and lasting changes for the betterment of all. We accessed a strength we did not own before. It was a strength that surpassed what we were able to endure or achieve on our own. And for some believers that strength enabled us to become more Christlike by ‘loving our enemies’ and ‘doing good to those who persecuted us.’ That’s right; that’s what we claim. And up to this very day, some of us keep proclaiming it, as we keep on look-out for such occasions to occur again; so that we can live true to the gospel for the sake of Christ; for the love of Christ.

Just so, moreover, the opposite can occur. When we are so self-confident in our own strength and power, we may find ourselves closed off to other sources of strength and power that could aid us even more. ‘Watch out,’ as I read in my morning devotions this past week. The reading was titled, “Dangerous Power.” And through that reading I heard the Holy Spirit saying to me, ‘Watch out, Thee Smith. Watch out, Christian soul. You can be relying on your own strength in a way that leads you to ignore other sources of strength and empowerment that God has made available to you for your good and in your best interests.

Just so I wonder: Just as these matters can be true for us as individual persons, how are they true of families and groups, and indeed of entire communities and families of peoples; even of nation-states and our own country. What would it mean to celebrate this weekend’s observance as an *inter-dependence* day? What might it mean to celebrate our nation’s radical dependence on other powers, or on a Higher Power greater than ourselves as a people? *Inter-dependence Day 2021*, it may be called. Maybe this is a year that more and more of us realize how inter-dependent we are as a people; inter-dependent with each other on other powers, or on a Higher Power greater than ourselves.

Then here’s the question of faith; of belief versus unbelief. Are we ready to celebrate that inter-dependence as Good News? Or rather, are we crestfallen, downcast, mortified, and even resentful, that this is the way it happens: that this is the way spiritual reality works—that *when we are weak we are strong*? Can we rather robustly *affirm* that this is the way spiritual reality works? Can we even join with the apostle to be “content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ?”—for the sake of that

kingdom that is coming versus our own empires, and special status as a nation or people. What would it take to be genuinely content with all that as a people and a nation? Or rather, are we so entrenched in ordinary, everyday and unconverted ways of being powerful that we despise, deny the reality, or simply neglect grace-filled ways of receiving power from outside ourselves?

I think we may be in the grace-filled position of having to believe, Christian friends and friends of Christ, what our Lord prophesied when he said—

I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, "Blessed is one who comes in the name of the Lord." (Luke 13:35)

Now as a matter of fact, Jesus says something just like that in today's gospel reading from Mark. There we find the second key verse that jumps off the page today. It's an astonishing verse, among the most astonishing in all scripture. There, in Jesus' hometown we are told:

He could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. (Mark 6:5-6)

But the pall of unbelief does not end there. Nor does the gospel go on to reaffirm Jesus as a powerful healer or miracle worker. Rather, Mark's gospel is more interested in a different kind of belief and a different kind of power. Immediately, Mark tells us in his breathless way, immediately Jesus calls the twelve apostles to minister with him, giving them authority and power to do what he himself could not do alone: healing people's sickness and casting out the evil powers that possess them and proclaiming the good news that the domain of God has arrived among us (Mark 6:7ff.). Yes, Jesus called disciples to help me because he too chose to be interdependent.

And what are the hallmarks of that interdependent domain? A very different kind of power is celebrated there and a different way of accessing power is employed. It involves our weakness because it requires casting about outside of our own strength for other sources of power and other resources for furthering our own interests. How can we embrace that as the Good News of the domain of God, so that we can be content with hardships and persecutions and calamities 'for the sake of Christ?' Well, maybe for the sake of Christ and his kingdom we begin to reach out to others to do with us what none of us can do alone and in our own strength. Maybe we learn to be constantly on the look-out for resources outside ourselves; to be more dependent not only on friends and allies in that venture. Maybe even our enemies and adversaries and persecutors have their part to play in motivating and challenging us 'for the sake of Christ' and the coming of his kingdom.

And maybe that's why, every year on this national anniversary, we have that challenging prayer Collect appointed in our Episcopal churches and its Book of Common Prayer.

Collect of the Day: Sunday, July 4, 2021

O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you **AND our neighbor**: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, **AND united to one another with pure affection**; through Jesus Christ our Lord . . . [Lectionary | The Cathedral of St. Philip \(cathedralatl.org\)](http://www.lectionary.org)

"*Through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" the Collect directs us to 'love God and our neighbor and be united to one another with pure affection.' In the apostle's words that means, 'For the sake of Christ.' For Christ's sake and for the coming of his kingdom we reach out to be united to one another with pure affection. Not in our own strength or with conventional power tactics do we do this. But by the grace of God we reach for one another in the effort to attain a purified affection. We see that reaching-out in our Black church tradition. But we also see it in those churches of this land that kept faith with our heritage as 'one nation under God.' All-in-all, by God's grace we try to love our enemies, and do good to those who persecute us, and not return evil for evil, but bind up everybody's wounds and intercede for everybody with a power that surpasses our own.

So maybe our national anniversary is like a wedding anniversary in this final way. Maybe every year we're also renewing our commitment to bring this nation of disparate peoples together, just as those divergent colonies struggled together in early America to overcome their differences so that we could become one people. Maybe every year we're renewing our will to rediscover whether, in the words of the apostle, 'God's grace is sufficient for that.' Now here I might imagine, as a priest of our church, that I could design a liturgy for the renewal of our national covenant to be 'one nation under God;' you know, in the same way that married couples on their wedding anniversary might elect to renew their wedding vows.

In that endeavor, I can think of no better words to use for renewing our 'one nation under God covenant' than to re-invoke those time-honored words of Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address. You will recall that in that speech he presided like a priest himself over the reuniting of our nation; in order—as he said—in order “that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth (Gettysburg address, November 19, 1863).

Happy *Inter*-dependence Day, my fellow Americans, and may God bless the United States of America! Amen.

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