

Love Feast on the Fourth of July

Galatians 3:28

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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The Fourth of July has always been a difficult holiday for me as a person who grew up in the Church of the Brethren denomination – one of the historic peace churches. I grew up in a family that did not pledge allegiance to the flag. I was told my allegiance was to God. None of my male relatives were in the military. While my friends were waving flags and singing “God Bless America” I was trying to keep the family dog from losing its mind while the fireworks exploded around us.

As an adult, I’m usually at our denominational Annual Conference and the day is filled with business meetings and worship. Some Fourth of July holidays go past and I almost forget it is happening. But it is hard to forget this year because the fireworks started going off around my house starting Memorial Day weekend.

It made me remember a rare 4th of July I was not at Annual Conference and got to spend the holiday with my family. I bought tickets for us to attend a baseball game. I wasn’t prepared for all the displays of patriotism. It began with a flag unfurled that was the size of the entire baseball field. A stealth bomber flew low overhead. I was widely uncomfortable with all the displays of military might. I turned to my husband and whispered, “I had no idea it would be like this.” He looked at me with dismay and said, “You know where you are, right?”

Brethren have always felt peculiar when patriotism is the expected norm. It is why I wanted you to hear the two quotes that Maiya and Rayna read to us today. One from a Brethren saint who said that if we have universal love for all humanity than patriotism would become obsolete. The other was from Frederick Douglass and is a painful reminder of the history of our country in which freedom has not existed for everyone.

I won’t be at Annual Conference this year and so I began to ponder how can I celebrate this holiday without glorifying militarism. Then the Black Lives Matter movement received new energy following the murder of yet another unarmed black citizen and I felt even more dread about this complex holiday.

So, I did some research and I learned that the first recorded celebration of the Fourth of July happened in Salem, North Carolina. (Salem means peace by the way.) In January of 1783, a preliminary peace agreement in Paris signaled the end of the Revolutionary War. The governor of North Carolina proclaimed July 4, 1783 as a day of thanksgiving for victory and peace. But without social media and television his proclamation had trouble gaining traction.

Then on June 30 of that year the governor traveled through Salem, North Carolina. Salem was a settlement of Moravians. The Moravian church is one of the oldest Protestant denominations in the world. It grew out of the Bohemian reformation before Martin Luther famously nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the Wittenberg door. This sect strove to live by the Sermon on the Mount and thus, they have an historical background of pacifism. At that time members of the Moravian church were forbidden to join the military, which didn't make them popular with their neighbors. This was true of our Church of the Brethren ancestors, as well. Moravian church members were fined, attacked and harassed so some young men in the Moravian Church spent the Revolutionary War hiding in the forest. So, when the governor of North Carolina mentioned his proclamation while visiting Salem, members of the Moravian Church were jubilant. They were so grateful that the war was over and so they got busy preparing to celebrate peace, not victory.

The festivities began with trombone music (for which Moravians have an affinity) and then they had Love Feast. You heard me right. The first recorded Fourth of July celebration had Love Feast as its centerpiece. Love Feast is something we have in common with Moravians, although the two experiences look very different. Church of the Brethren Love Feast consists of feet washing, a simple meal and communion based on the Last Supper. It is a call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus in love, service and sacrifice. Love Feast, Moravian style, is based on the first meal Christians shared after Pentecost. Their Love Feast consists of music and prayer and takes place right in the sanctuary. Traditionally, sweet buns and cups of coffee heavy with sweet cream and sugar are passed down the pews. It is an invitation to love and unity.

A Moravian composer, in celebration of peace, shared his song *Psalm of Joy* for that first 4th of July event. Francis Scott Key's *Star-Spangled Banner* lyrics of *rocket's red glare and bombs bursting in air* wouldn't be written for another three decades.

After Love Feast the citizens of Salem gathered outside for more singing and then walked joyfully down the main street and around the public square. The Moravians are noted for their documentation of events and so the entry for July 4, 1783 in the Salem Diary included these words:

... Hearts were filled with the peace of God, evident during the entire day and especially during the procession, and all around there was silence, even the wind being still.

Salem, North Carolina continues to have a 4th of July celebration that includes a naturalization ceremony for new citizens; a concert, in which *Psalm of Joy*, is performed; and a procession around the Salem Square. I wonder if they still do that part in sacred silence.

When I learned the story of Salem, North Carolina my lungs filled with air. I can claim that 4th of July...a celebration of the end of war...a celebration that calls for unity and love...that celebrates its new citizens and sings a song of joy. It is a 4th of July reimagined right back to its origins.

But I need more. It can't truly be a celebration if not everyone is included in the freedom, love and unity we claim. As Frederick Douglass asked, "What to the American Slave is your 4th of July?" What is it to the immigrant in prison in Adelanto...the families of Black, Indigenous and People of Color murdered in our streets...the transgender person who can face legal discrimination in many states in our nation...the hundreds of thousands of our citizens who are in jail without a conviction merely because they are too poor to post bail? A true celebration requires equality and a commitment to dismantle all prejudices.

And I need even more than that. I need a celebration that does not end at the borders of our country. We know better than that. Jesus didn't call us to be good Americans. Jesus called us to be love and to love all of God's children. Think of the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus called us to love our neighbor as we love our selves and the example of goodness he gave was from someone considered other....from someone outside. What makes us good is not the empire but who we are to each other.

I need a 4th of July celebration that includes a covenant that we will reform what is not working for all our neighbors, here and abroad. So, to that end I decided to re-write the "Pledge of Allegiance" I did not recite as a child to something I could say as an adult. Words not about independence but about interdependence.

*I covenant to love the Lord my God
And the beautiful souls who are my neighbors on this planet
For we are indivisibly intertwined
in the pursuit of liberty, justice, respect and peace for all.*

Love must be the centerpiece of who we are as a nation, a global community and children of the Living God. May it be to that end that we celebrate and commit ourselves in the name of Christ. Amen.