

***Order of Service – July 3, 2016
The Weak, The Least, The Dependent***

Musical Prelude

Greeting -- In Gratitude for H

1st Hymn: Lord, Whose Love in Humble Service, Green 132

*Readings -- Leviticus 19:32; Matthew 25:40; 1Corinthians 12:21-27;
2Corinthians 12:9*

2nd Hymn: America The Beautiful

Joys and Concerns

Musical interlude

Prayer -- A Power Made Perfect in Weakness

3rd Hymn: Turn, Turn, Turn, Blue 28

Dependence Day

Silent worship

4th Hymn: Who Are the Patriots? Green 286

Closing -- May We Remember

Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Welcome

Good morning Friends. Happy 3rd of July. Tomorrow is Independence Day, and we once again celebrate our collective sense of self as a country, our big ideals, our grand visions, our strength, the stand we take for freedom and independence. But, I believe that big things are made up of little parts, and so for today I want to lift up the little, the weak, the least, the easily overlooked, the dependent. In honor of all

that goes generally unheralded, to begin our worship I found a poem that pays homage to the letter H:

Abigail Carroll: "In Gratitude"

For *h*, tiny fire in the hollow of the throat, opener of every *hey*
hi, *how are you*, *hello*; chums with *c*, with *t*, shy lover of *s*; there and not there—
never seen, hardly heard, yet real as air fluttering the oak, holding up the hawk; the
sound of a yawn, of sleep, of heat, a match, its quivering orange flame turning
wood into light, light into breath; the sound of stars if stars could be heard, perhaps
the sound of space; life speaking life: warm air endowed to hard clay—

a heart, hurt, a desire to be healed— the work of bees stuck in the nubs

of hollyhocks, real as the muffled hush of sleep, the silent *oh* in the throat when a
hand is laid upon the shoulder; hunger—the body's empty cry for filling, for
loving, for knowing the intimacy of breath, of air, of half-breathed words, fragile
as the stars: *hollow*, *hush*, *holy*.

For H, and for all small and overlooked things, let's sing together our first hymn.

First Hymn: Lord Whose Love in Humble Service, Green 132

Readings

Leviticus 19:32 You shall rise before the aged and infirm, and give honor to the old and weak; and you shall revere your God.

Matthew 25:40 And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

1 Corinthians 12:21-27 The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

2 Corinthians 12:9 But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Second Hymn: America, the Beautiful, hymn handout

Joys and Concerns, Interlude

Prayer

God of Small Things, God whose love in humble service Bears the weight of human need, we need you. We are human. We need mercy, and we need to learn to be merciful, and so we call on You. God of the overlooked, undervalued, never seen. God of the elders, the frail, the season of dependence...God of Air, invisible, ever present, ever faithful, once more we turn with reverence to you. Once more we remember the Body we belong to. Oh One of Whom we are too often forgetful, forgive us our forgetting. We belong to the family that forgets. Forgets its smallest, weakest members, forgets our own great need, our hunger for the holy, our love of You, our Reliance on You. And so we pray: help us to remember, to know our belonging, members of One Body in Christ. On this day we pray for ourselves...we pray for each other...we pray for the least of these...and we pray for the heart of our nation, so afraid of weakness, so concerned with its own strength...May we admit our dependence even as we celebrate our independence...May we see your face in the least of these....May we yet say to those smallest and weakest members: we have need of you...May we yet know the grace that is sufficient for us...May we yet learn the power made perfect in weakness...Be with us in our weakness, God of the small things, God of the elders, God of the least. We pray as one Body, one family remembering, together.

Third Hymn, Turn, Turn, Turn, Blue 28; Message "Dependence Day"

Benediction

May we remember. May we call back to belonging all members of this Body. May we see the Holy in the hollow and the hush, the strength of the invisible air. May we honor our dependence. May we revere our great need. May we rise before the aged and the infirm, give homage to the old and the poor. May we love the Least, the God of Small Things, the Very Sufficient Grace of the Power Made Perfect in Weakness.

Message -- A Dependence Day Parade

The other day my five year old son Cazimer asked me from the backseat of the car which was stronger: people or air? He meant this question in the way that he poses

hypothetical strength contests between lions and tigers, or whales and sharks -- like, if a polar bear and a wolf had a race, who would win? But his question opened up a really interesting conversation. Which *is* stronger, people or air? We tried to puzzle it out. We talked about how people can make machines that move air, like fans, and air can't do that. *We* can make air do our will. But on the other hand, look at tornadoes and hurricanes. Pretty strong air. If the capacity to cause harm is a measure of strength, then it's a bit of a toss up. People have agency over air in our massively more advanced ability to compromise air's health. Air is defenseless against our smokestacks, it just has to take what we dish out. Then again, air can be destructive to us and the things we have built: thinking about hurricanes, again. we have some defenses, but they aren't always sufficient. What finally clinched air as the dominant one over people was what we determined to be air's Independence of us. It's a specific kind of strength. If we disappeared completely, air wouldn't mind. But if air disappeared, we would mind. Even if we have more capacity to cause harm and air is more defenseless than us, we reasoned that at the bottom of all assessments of strength, we need air, and air has no need of us. So, we concluded, maybe air is the stronger, because of our utter dependence on it.

And that got me musing about Dependence. Tomorrow, of course, is Independence Day, the national holiday in celebration of our country's creation story, when we honor our sovereignty, our freedom, our ingenuity, our rugged individualism, our strength, all the ways we have of expressing an American sense of agency in the world. Independence will be upheld tomorrow as an ideal upon which our country's national identity rests, and it's fine to give independence it's due. There is certainly something to be said for a distinct sense of self. But, we can be sure that the celebrations and parades will definitely NOT honor ***Dependence***. We will NOT pay tribute to what we are dependent on, or laud dependent people. And I get that that's an uncomfortable idea, maybe a counterintuitive idea. Why would we celebrate Dependence? What is there to celebrate? No one *wants* to be dependent, right? Dependence is something most people, when asked, say we want to avoid.

But dependence is also a fact. It's a fact of our independence-loving, individual lives that we **are** actually, dependent. On air, for example. On water -- the

frighteningly dry weather has made me very aware of how much we need water. We're actually dependent on a dizzying number of things in this interdependent world. And so I've been thinking this week about an alternate America, one that celebrates a national Dependence Day holiday. Maybe it could be August 4th. I've been thinking about how that hypothetical America would differ from our own. What kind of culture would celebrate and honor not just the ideal of *independence* but the *reality* of dependence? What *if* the observance of Dependence was as much a part of our creation myth, our national story, our country's idea of itself, as Independence is? How *might* our understanding of **strength** shift? How might the meaning of freedom change?

In the America where Dependence Day is a national holiday, we'd have Dependence Day parades, and they'd start by celebrating the air. The vanguard would march down the street, Trumpets sounding, the air pumping through lungs and brass making a mighty and joyous sound. The banners flap exuberantly in the wind without which they would not flap at all, and would proclaim "**We're Dependent on Air!**" They would lead the procession. And after them would follow a tribute to all those invisible things we are dependent upon. Maybe a float trussed out to look like the ocean -- people could be dressed up as phytoplankton, without which we would not have enough oxygen to breath. And microbes -- a float with loads of brown fabric representing soil, and joyful little microbes making a vibrant ecosystem, papier mache intestines with maybe tennis balls representing millions of lactobacillus bacteria. And the banners would all enthusiastically declare our dependence, with exclamation points -- **We're dependent on microbes! We're dependent on Phytoplankton! We need the GulfStream! Thank you ocean currents for the stable climate!** Maybe a local gradeschool could march as the periodic table of elements. The banners would say **We Need Covalent Bonds!** The next section of the parade would honor the farmers, the migrant workers -- **We're dependent on food growers!** the banners would staunchly declare. and then there would be some way to represent the factory workers of Bangladesh and China. We couldn't have our electronic devices without them, or our underwear.

And then. Then the parade would end with representatives of dependence itself -- the state of being Dependent, embodiments of dependence: we'd have infants in

strollers, and snuggli carriers. we'd have some way of representing people in prisons -- 2.2 million utterly dependent people behind bars -- this would be an easy float to accomplish. And then the patients in hospitals. And then the elders. We'd bring up the back of the parade with the wheelchairs, the hospital beds, and this would be an acclamation, an acknowledgement, an invocation, the way we will celebrate and invoke and lift up the principle of Independence tomorrow. Just so, a Dependence Day Parade would laud and honor Dependence, an unavoidable aspect of the human condition, an absolute feature of life on earth.

And Possibly at this point in the parade a hush would fall over the festive crowd, their American flags would still in reverence, as the Elders, the sick, those in great need, are wheeled through the avenues of America, giving us all the opportunity to bow our heads before them in their utter reliance on others, an ultimate emblem of the pinnacle of dependency, something we all understand to be our likely destination, the thing we walk toward, the hallowed land to which we travel, the goal of the spiritual and material life, the end of life well lived, their weakness and frailty a badge of honor, not at all something of which they, or we, are ashamed. And so, at the end of the Dependence Day parades, our hearts would fill with love and recognition, for the way Alzheimer's patients and nursing home residents so perfectly embody Dependence, remind us of the truth of our condition, give us the opportunity to serve, to bless the meek and the weak and the least, to see in their faces the face of Christ, and the selves we will one day almost certainly be.

In **this** country, the one where independence is upheld as an ideal and dependence is not, our political conversation reverberates with words like freedom and strength, and the rights of individuals, and 'being stronger than' -- stronger than whoever it is we should be stronger than. I hear a narrative that reviles weakness, actually, or at least a certain understanding of weakness. I hear a story that tells of strength only as the capacity to harm, as if Caz had posed the question that day in the car this way: if people and air had a fight, who would win? As if that criterion --who wins a fight -- could be the only and ultimate arbiter of strength. In this America, I hear a dominant mythology that says that whoever the winner of the fight is, *that's* the strong one, and the world should be constructed to benefit the winner. It's not the only storyline we have as a country, but it's a dominant. This storyline always divides the world into winners and losers, and for some people

who are given a lot of air time in our culture right now, it's clear who the winners are in their opinion, and they get to tell everyone else who the losers are. But the thing is, I'm not sure anyone who thinks they are defined by their freedom and their strength and their independence is really any of those things. Listening to the political talk these days, the more I hear declarations of strength and freedom, or longings for lost strength and lost freedom, the more I listen for the whispers of dependence and weakness unclaimed, denied, shamed, feared. The more I wish we knew how to turn into our weakness and dependence, to enfold it into ourselves, to embrace it with love, to see in our great need and the great need of others a truth that is at least as majestic as the ability to win a fight, and to honor it with as much conviction as we honor independence.

I recently had breakfast with a woman in great need. She is living with advanced Alzheimer's disease. She was sitting in her wheelchair, and she raised her hand, and she gazed at it. She moved her wrist, and her fingers, and looked at her hand, as if she didn't know whose it was. And so I said "that's your hand." She continued to look at her hand with what seemed like a mixture of confusion and wonder. I said, "that hand has done a lot of things in your life, right?" She nodded, slowly. So I went through a list of things I knew she had done with her hands: washed and swaddled babies, held the hands of toddlers, planted vegetables, woven rugs, held a kayak paddle. And at the last one she smiled, and started to cry -- a happy and sad cry, a remembering cry. A cry of a being who is still in there, who needs help to eat, to go to the bathroom, to bathe, a being who asks me without words to be present when it is difficult, to be patient, to value what is hard to value, and easy to dismiss and ignore, to turn toward dependence and weakness and not away from it, to wonder about a culture that values only one kind of strength, one aspect of the human condition. This woman I would walk behind in a Dependence Day parade. This woman I would push through the avenues of hushed and reverent people, who see in the distance of her eyes both our own destiny and our temporary privilege of attending to and bearing witness to her *perfect* Dependence.

When **I** was a dependent **child**, in Auburn, my family went to the parade on the 4th of July. I remember a soldier in a wheelchair being pushed in the parade. I don't remember how old he was, or what war he was a veteran of, I just remember that

he was in a uniform and he had no legs. I've been thinking this week about that soldier, an image of dependence in the midst of a celebration of independence, and I've been thinking about my friend with Alzheimer's, who needs others to remember for her, and I've been thinking about the strength of air, a strength that can't even be seen, that seems like it isn't even there. I've been thinking that maybe these least ones -- the broken, the lost, the invisible we rely on -- are what God is like. What if the Holiest Thing We Can Know is like that: overlooked, taken for granted, everywhere, needed, in need, asking us for help to move through the world, to remember. To *re-member* -- To recall and bring into belonging all the members of the One Body, by the grace of a power made perfect in weakness.

Verse 1

*O Beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain;
For purple mountain majesties, above the fruited plain!
America! America! God shed His grace on thee!
And crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea.*

Verse 2

*O Beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife.
Who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life!
America! America! May God thy gold refine!
Till all success be nobleness, and every gain divine.*

Verse 3

*O Beautiful for patriot dream, that sees beyond the years.
Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears!*

America! America! God mend thine every flaw!

Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.