

*Order of Service -- July 9, 2017  
Fire, Freedom, and the Possibility of America*

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**Greeting:**

Good morning Friends. Vincent Harding, the late historian, theologian, Mennonite lay-pastor and civil rights leader, who was the author of Martin Luther King's famously radical Beyond Vietnam speech, wrote an essay in 2007 titled "*Is America Possible?*" This week, as our country passed the 241st anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, that query seemed to echo with a new and urgent profundity. In that essay, he wrote:

*Somehow, in a time like our own, when the capacity for imagining appears to be endangered, both by the technology of television and the Internet and by the poverty of public dreams, it seems especially crucial to (ask) such a question as "Is America possible?" ... everywhere that I have paused to reflect on the powerful, flooding movement of the black struggle for freedom in America, I have been called back to that ...query and challenge. For it is a question that has always been at the heart of the African American quest for democracy in this land. And wherever we have seen freedom seekers, community organizers, and artisans of democracy, standing their ground, calling others to the struggle, advancing into danger, calling forth the beloved community, and creating new realities, it is clear that they are taking the question seriously; shaping their own answers, and testing the possibilities of their dreams. Is America possible? They say Yes.*

For freedom seekers, for America the possible, let us sing together America the Beautiful, from the red hymnal, number 68.

**First Hymn: America the Beautiful (O Beautiful) Red 68**

### **Readings**

**Genesis 4:9**

*Then the Lord said to Cain, 'Where is your brother Abel?' He said, 'I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?'*

**Leonard Cohen, excerpt Democracy** *It's coming from the sorrow in the street /The holy places where the races meet ... /From the wells of disappointment /Where the women kneel to pray/ For the grace of God in the desert here /And the desert far away: Democracy is coming to the USA... /It's coming to America first /The cradle of the best and of the worst/ It's here they got the range /And the machinery for change/ And it's here they got the spiritual thirst /It's here the family's broken /And it's here the lonely say/ That the heart has got to open/ In a fundamental way: Democracy is coming to the USA*

**Ani DiFranco: Fuel, Excerpt** *They were digging a new foundation in Manhattan/ And they discovered a slave cemetery there /May their souls rest easy now that lynching is frowned upon/ And we've moved on to the electric chair... /Am I headed for the same brick wall /Is there anything I can do About anything at all /Except go back to that corner in Manhattan /And dig deeper, Dig deeper this time/ Down beneath the impossible pain of our history /Beneath the unknown bones /Beneath the bedrock of the mystery /Beneath the sewage system and the Path train/ Beneath the cobblestones and the water main /Beneath the traffic of friendships and street deals /Beneath the screeching of kamikaze cab wheels /Beneath everything I can think of to think about /Beneath it all, Beneath all get out /Beneath the good and the kind and the stupid and the cruel /There's a fire that's just waiting for fuel*

**2 Corinthians 3:17** <sup>17</sup>*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*

### **Second Hymn: My Country Tis of Thee**

#### **Prayer**

*Holy One, Spirit in Whom We Live and Move and Have our Being. Spirit Who Lives and Moves and Has Being, in us. We ask that you shed your grace upon us, gathered here together, again, today. Open our hearts, open our eyes, be thou our vision, let thy freedom ring that we might be called forth to that beloved community we long for, that flowering of dreams and imagination we know to be possible -- which is in the very*

*ground on which we stand, in the very rocks and hills, the shores and seas, the hollows, the mountains, the cities the towns of this thirsting land. Shed thy grace on us here today, on this people, on all people that we may be One, beloved all, a brotherhood, a sisterhood, a neighborhood, one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all. We offer these our prayers for our country, our land, our world together today. Amen.*

### **Benediction**

*Is America Possible? Am I my brother's keeper? What is freedom for? May those queries live in us as we live in the Presence of the Spirit. May we call forth a beloved country: America, America, May God Shed His Grace on Thee. And crown thy good with brotherhood -- **and sisterhood!** -- **a neighborhood!** -- From sea to shining sea.*

## Message

My nine year son Cyrus participated in a soccer club this spring and early summer, and it was his first taste of serious sports. Previously soccer was purely about having fun. Games and practices could reliably find half the team examining worms and flowers on the field, and Cyrus commandeering the ball, refusing to pass it or share it, running faster than everyone else and kicking hard, scoring goals, grinning ear to ear. But with this new soccer league, a travel team, the emphasis was on skill building, on teamwork, on hard work, on winning. Cyrus discovered that soccer has rules, that there are agreements that participants make about how the game works, what you can do and what you can't. He found himself no longer free to be a team of one, to just take the ball and run and kick a soaring goal with everyone else running behind him. These kids didn't examine worms and flowers. He chafed at the parameters, at the experience of other kids being more skilled than he is. What he loves to do is run free. By the end of the season he was able to acknowledge that the curtailing of the wild sheer fun of running down the field has actually helped him to improve his skills, and that is satisfying, he likes that, but he was still a little grumpy about the strict adherence to rules. There's a tradeoff there that he's still sorting out. And I think in these days in our country there are similar struggles with our ideals and experience of freedom, the tradeoffs we are or are not willing to make in its curtailment, and the parameters we do or do not apply in its exercise.

We hear alot about freedom in our country. This time of year, we hear freedom invoked to sell mattresses and American flags. We heard the word conjured in support of market driven health care, tax breaks, and increased military spending. It is appealed to regularly in arguments in favor of the need to keep and bear arms. But what is this often invoked ideal, really? We're fuzzy on the actual mechanics. Do we mean to invoke that kind of sheer, joyful exhilaration that Cyrus felt running down the soccer field, un beholden to any silly rules, ignoring the other people on our team? What is freedom? What does it mean to be free? And What IS freedom for? Like Vincent Harding's query '*Is America Possible?*', and Cain's famous question in Genesis "*Am I my brothers keeper?*" in these days '*What is Freedom?, and What is Freedom For?*' are not idle questions. They are spiritual queries. And I think America is in need of a prayerful clearness committee.

One of the opportunities and challenges of the word freedom in our country is that it means different things to different people. Freedom might mean one thing to someone whose ancestors two hundred years ago were slaves and another to those whose ancestors were slaveholders. It might carry a meaning to one of the more than two million incarcerated people in the United States that it does not hold for

someone who has never been inside prison walls. It might mean something to a struggling addict that it doesn't mean to someone who doesn't struggle with addiction. It might mean something to the person who can't afford food at the end of the month that it doesn't mean to the one who can.

There's also something ineffable about freedom as an ideal that is, fittingly, hard to capture. It's almost easier to define it by what is absent when there **is** Freedom. When there **is** freedom, there is an absence of coercion, an absence of forced obedience, an absence of bondage or imprisonment. We can tell when political, civic, bodily, economic and spiritual freedom is obviously lacking, when it is not honored, and when it is threatened. And when freedom flourishes, there **is** a positive quality of bodily and spiritual self determination, authority in oneself, autonomy and agency.

But there is something deeper, too. there are those brief moments here on Sundays, or with people we love who love us, or in nature, in our devotionals or meditations, at times of extreme joy or sorrow or clarity when we may get a sense of an energy, an essential freedom at the heart of life, at the heart of our very own aliveness, which can never be owned, never be bought or sold, never truly captured or imprisoned. There are those moments when we know, truly "*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*" In those moments we can feel a spark of inner knowing, a little flare of that fire just waiting for fuel, the Spirit, the Christ, what we might dare to call God, which is of us, and of which we are a part -- something Sacred, a pure pulsing freedom. For brief moments we do know the truth, and it is so grand, and right here where we are, and we are set free.

But it is mostly not clear, I think, for most of us, how to live into the truth that sets us free in our daily embodied lives, where we are not free from bad news that encroaches on us and scares us, where we are not free from the needs of our bodies for shelter and food, clean air and clean water, not free from the bonds of relationships that ask things of us, not free from emotions that tug us and hold us in their power, not free from the consequences of our own actions and the impacts of other people's choices, not free from the complex web of overlapping ramifications and relationships to which, like it or not, we **are** beholden. There is always this stubborn question of relationship, of responsibility, of mutuality, and a tenacious interdependence, of the ties that bind and hem in. **Are** we our brother's keeper? And if so, how does that affect our freedom, if we are called into responsibility for our brother? How does it affect our brother's freedom?

I confess that I have long been wary about the ways in which words like freedom and liberty become mythical abstractions that tend toward idolatry, and lend themselves easily to manipulation, both of meaning, and of people. I have observed that many of my country's most beautiful ideals, best impulses, and cherished freedoms have required vigilant, often violently opposed struggle to extend their aims beyond an elite few. In my lifetime I've observed the stealthy ways that our vast military capacity and macro-economic policies have been used to curtail democratic oversight and accountability, and to reinforce accumulation -- even hoarding -- of wealth and power in fewer and fewer hands. I've watched the way that ordinary people have accepted this hoarding and accumulation, this fathomless quest for personal profit, to be the definition of our "national interest," conflated with, confused with, and equated with "our way of life," as if freedom means above all the freedom to consume, to acquire stuff and wealth. And I've seen political leaders of all persuasions succumb to a knee-jerk resort to violence when that accumulation of power and wealth is threatened.

And yet, offering those critical observations cannot by themselves meet and quench the great spiritual thirst upon this land, and simply do not seem to be sufficient fuel for the fire that is waiting, the heart that *is*, I believe, wanting to open in this country. And so I come again to the resources of our tradition. And I find here an inclusive, radically progressive and deeply conservative in the best sense of the word, mystical, practiced, lived Christian faithfulness to the Presence of the Spirit of the Lord. And I know that where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And so I bring here today these queries: *Am I my brother's keeper? Is America possible? What is freedom? What is freedom for?*

I ask that we hold these queries in our individual lives and remember the witnesses and testimonies that have been tested and seasoned in community, which offer us concrete ways to live those prayerful queries out into the divided, but still beating, heart of our country. And I ask that in our daily lives, in the coming days, we attend closely, as diligently as we can, to the truth that sets us free. That of God is in everyone, is not for sale and never was...is not a commodity and never can be: where the spirit of the Lord is, there is Freedom. And I offer also an observation from our soccer experience this spring: Cyrus found that the curtailment of his freedom to run, wild and full of joy, down the soccer field, was a loss, a loss that needed, for his 9 year old self, to be witnessed and honored, but in the end it also yielded skills he wouldn't otherwise have gotten, and brought participation in an actual game, with relationships and agreements and shared understandings. He had to give up something but he gained an experience of working with others, of knowing himself to be part of something, and he learned something new.

Vincent Harding, in a radio interview before his death asked another question. He asked whether there can be a beloved country, the way that the civil rights movement envisioned a beloved community. "Can there be a beloved country?" He asked. "Why don't we try, and see?" This 4th of July I felt a glimmer of America the Possible. Our family spent the day at a state park on Cayuga Lake. I think there were thousands of people there. It was incredibly crowded. There were people of all skin colors, there were several large Muslim families, women in hijab, many different languages, many different accents, all kinds of foods on a variety of grills in the teeming, publicly funded park that day. It seemed very democratic, very peaceful, all of us with ancestries originating all over the world coming to this one beautiful spot to honor freedom, freedom that we agree to put parameters in some small ways, so we could all be there in the fresh air, the clean water, the freely shining sun. That night, our family set flares on the lakeshore, and watched as other spots of fire flared on the shores, north, south, east, west, reflecting in the smooth dark water. We put lights on our canoe, and paddled out into the lake, watching the little fires burn, and the hundreds of fireworks exploding in the sky and shining in the water. Floating in the dark with my little family on our little boat because it's a free country, and we can, surrounded by a million points of flaring light, I felt that essential freedom, that aliveness at the heart of everything -- in the exploding lights, the dark water like glass all around us, all those human hands setting wick to flame and watching in wonder as it burns. For a moment I knew the truth, and I was made free. I felt the Spirit of the Lord moving over the waters, and the spirit was freedom itself. And I could believe then that Democracy is coming to the USA, still coming. that America *is* possible, despite ourselves, that we are still figuring out what this freedom is for, and that it wouldn't take much to offer something besides violence and materialism to do with it, because there really is a fire just waiting for fuel.