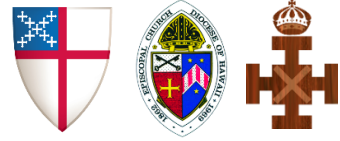


From the Bishop

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The Episcopal Diocese of Hawai'i



A Reflection on July 4, 2021

Today, Sunday, July 4, is Independence Day in the United States. If it were a weekday, there could even be a lesser commemoration in the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church. It is a commemoration that was only adopted into the Church's calendar with the 1929 Book of Common Prayer. Frankly, it is not a liturgical observance with which I am comfortable. It certainly ought not replace the normal Sunday liturgy. Perhaps it is time to remove it from the Church's calendar altogether.

Why? The holiday is too "patriotic" and even "nationalistic" to my mind for an observance in a Christian church during worship. We ought not confuse our faith and identity as disciples of Jesus Christ with our temporal citizenship. For the same reason, I do not think national (or denominational) flags belong in sanctuaries – especially near the altar. I do not believe Christians can or should identify temporal civil authority or any leader with God or "God's will." Even having "In God We Trust" as national motto (adopted by Congress only in 1959) is suspect to my mind. "*E pluribus unum*" ("Out of many, one") is much closer to our national ideal without confusing the nation for God.

Now, I like a good picnic and fireworks. I am a citizen of the United States. I am first, however, a disciple of Christ Jesus. So, I am a Christian first and a citizen second. I certainly do not believe God has "chosen" the United States or that the United States is a "Christian" nation, other than a majority of its citizen claim the Christian faith and its history is bound to Western Europe. This is not "the city on the hill."

As Christians, we are called to measure our life as citizens with the Gospel. We must not expect such a federalist democratic republic to be bound by "Christianity." History has shown us that theocracies (of whatever religion) become exclusivist and authoritarian. As Christian citizens of the United States, we are, therefore, called to consider our shared history. How have we lived into God's mission of fellowship, righteousness, and love, and how have we failed? Where has the Church participated in exploitation, conquest, and oppression? What can we learn from the past as a corrective for future generations?

The United States is an empire. In the first three books of *The City of God*, St. Augustine of Hippo reflects on the sack of Rome in 410 CE. He suggests that human "empire" is driven by *libido dominandi* ("lust to dominate"). Augustine is not using the term "lust" in a Freudian way connected exclusively with sexual desire. "Lust" points to the drive to address basic human needs, desires, and fears. They are answered in a corrupt way by the need to dominate and control. It is the unstable, ambivalent, and ambiguous desire to be secure, to be in charge, to be powerful, to be right, and, even, to be loved. It is ultimately the desire to be God – or God's chosen one.



As Christians who are also citizens of the United States in the 21st century, we must acknowledge that the founding and expansion of the nation was driven by *libido dominandi*. Yes, there were Christian ideals in 1776 of the “brotherhood of man” and God as re-articulated in words of the 18th century Enlightenment, but “progress” was accomplished by the displacement and genocide of the indigenous people of North America, the military conquest of a portion of another independent nation (Mexico), “buying” vast acreage claimed by other imperialist Europeans (the Louisiana Purchase and Alaska), displacing another imperialist power (from Spain: Guam, Puerto Rico and, for decades, the Philippines), and participating in the overthrow of a government and annexation a whole independent nation (Hawai‘i). Most, importantly, the wealth of the United States is deeply rooted in the near total replacement of the indigenous people by colonist settlers from Europe and free labor from race based chattel slavery. All citizens of the United States are the inheritors and, in some way, perpetrators of *libido dominandi*.

Christian Churches (here I mean all denominations including the Episcopal Church) were complicit in this empire building of the United States. Recent news stories from residential schools for indigenous children in Canada are horrific, but let us not think that they are unique to that country. They are part of the history of the United States. Likewise, the issues of racial profiling and race-based violence are alive and well in the nation. White supremacists and nationalists have again publicly entered the body politic of the United States.

Why? How did Christians who had heard the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:35-40) and Paul’s reminder that race and culture are meaningless in Christ (Galatians 3:28-29) discount and oppress other human beings? It requires seeing other people as less than human. The stranger, the foreigner, the other is just not truly valuable or as good as me and mine.

As followers of Christ in the 21st century, we must honestly face up to our ancestors’ failures and evil. More importantly, we must look to ourselves. What prejudices and preconceptions continue to linger (consciously or unconsciously) in our minds and actions? How is our Church and our Diocese still participating in *libido dominandi* in 21st century Hawai‘i? This requires humility (taking Philippians 2:1-5 as a guide) and honesty (taking Ephesians 4:25 as a guide – in fact, all of chapter 4 is worthy of consideration). As Episcopalians, the Baptismal Covenant is our personal and corporate guide (BCP pages 304-305).

So, as the sun sets on this fourth of July, I invite the Diocese to join the Reconciliation Task Force in conversations about our common life. They will begin with presentations and conversation at Education Day on Friday, October 22, at ‘Iolani School and online. We must share honestly about our experiences and our reality.



Almighty God, who created us in your own image: Grant us grace fearlessly to contend against evil and to make no peace with oppression; and, that we may reverently use our freedom, help us to employ it in the maintenance of justice in our communities and among the nations, to the glory of your holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Your Brother in Christ Jesus,

+Bob

The Right Reverend Robert L. Fitzpatrick

(Pronouns: he, him, his)

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