

Independence Day: July 4, 2010
Saint Peter's Church, Glenside, PA
A Sermon by The Rev. Frank P. Toia

Open our minds, Lord Christ, that we may know you;
Open our hearts that we may love you;
Open our eyes that we may see you;
Open our hands that we may serve you. Amen

This has been a hard sermon to write. Independence Day doesn't come on Sunday very often, so even though officially the lessons for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost take precedence and the Independence Day lessons are supposed to be moved to Monday, I decided to focus on the 4th of July this morning. And that's when the trouble started.

The trouble is that there's not much that's uplifting in the news these days. You may have noticed. And I, for one, am feeling discouraged.

It's not about our personal lives. Things are going almost embarrassingly well for the Toias. We have our health, a good home, a wonderful parish family, enough money so we can devote our time and energy to things we really enjoy and care about; our son just got engaged to a delightful young woman whom we love and I've even managed to lose some weight! So life is good.

Except when I think about our country and our world.

In the final episode of the PBS program *Bill Moyers Journal*, Bill says to his guest, Barry Lopez, "I was talking to a mutual friend of ours one night. And he has always been an affirmative and optimistic fellow. And he was saying, 'You know, Moyers, for the first time in my life,' and he's in his 50s, he said, 'I'm beginning to think this America I believed in won't work. That the forces arrayed against justice and fairness are so great that we're going to go down.'"

And I thought, "Whoa! That really reflects what I've been feeling lately!" And as if to rub salt in the wounds, the cover article in this week's *Time Magazine* is about the 3.5 billion dollars that was spent on lobbyists last year and is entitled "*The best Laws money can buy*".

Even though my private life is not seriously undermined by the interminable wars, or our national addiction to fossil fuels, or the rampant political corruption, or America's growing fear of strangers, or the 13.5 million American children living in poverty, or the radical resurgence of racial bigotry, or the growing disparity between the rich and the poor in this country, or the increasing political posturing and polarization, I want my grandchildren and yours to live in a country that is true to the ideals upon which it was founded: fairness and justice and equal opportunity for all.

So, are the "forces arrayed against justice and fairness" as Bill Moyers' friend suggested, "so great that we're going to go down?"

Bill goes on in that interview to say to his guest, Barry Lopez, "The very night [that my friend said

this] I came across something that you [Barry] had written. You wrote, 'There are simply no answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of leaning into the light.'

"...making your life a worthy expression of leaning into the light." What a fascinating phrase! And somehow I think that hidden in that phrase is the antidote to the despair we may feel about our country and our world.

When I mentioned my struggle to Linda, her cryptic response was, "You and I both know that the answers to important questions don't come from out there somewhere; they come from the inner world of our spiritual lives."

Let's turn now to the Gospel for Independence Day to see if it can shed some light on "leaning into the light". I want to read it to you in Eugene Peterson's colloquial translation called *The Message*.

Jesus said, "You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.... Live generously and graciously toward all others, the way God lives toward you."

"Live generously and graciously toward all others, the way God lives toward you."

Most of the traditional translations have it, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" but the Greek word that is usually translated as "perfect" didn't take on that meaning until centuries later. In Jesus' time it meant something like "true" or "consistent" or "having integrity". Biblical scholars now understand that the parallel passage in Luke's Gospel is closer to Jesus' meaning – Luke says, "Be compassionate as God is compassionate."

So forget about the quest for spiritual and moral perfection. That just leads to feelings of inadequacy and guilt and self-recrimination. Instead, aim for a life reflecting God's attitude towards all of God's creation – a life of compassion and generosity and graciousness.

Practice indiscriminant compassion toward friends and strangers and enemies. And especially toward yourself.

In that same interview with Bill Moyers, Barry Lopez talks about the myth of Prometheus. It seems that a number of ancient Greek philosophers retold the story of how Prometheus stole fire from Zeus and gave it to human beings. One philosopher put an interesting twist to the story. In his version Zeus says to Prometheus, "So you have this wonderful technology, the ability to create fire, and you have given it to the humans. It will be a failure. This technology will be their undoing unless they have two other gifts that are necessary to make it work: one is justice and the other is reverence."

If Zeus had been talking today, he might have said, "So you have this wonderful technology – you can split atoms, you can fly in the air, you can communicate instantaneously, you can extract oil from miles below the sea – this technology will be your undoing unless you have two other gifts that are necessary to make it work: one is justice and the other is reverence.

Justice and reverence.

Justice is, of course, the natural child of compassion, which is the bedrock of all of the world's religions. Compassion and its child justice are of the very nature of God. I John tells us that God is love. And compassion is love in action. So you could say God is compassion. And in this morning's Gospel, Jesus is calling us to act like God – to be compassionate toward all. To practice indiscriminate compassion.

And the other necessary gift is reverence. Reverence, to borrow from the title of a book by Professor Paul Woodruff, is "a forgotten virtue" that we need to renew. Lopez summarizes Paul Woodruff like this: he says that

...the virtue of reverence is rooted in the understanding that there is a world beyond human control, [beyond] human invention, and [beyond] human understanding. And that that world will always be there, no matter how sophisticated our technologies ... become. The great mystery will be there forever. How do you walk away from the darkness of the world and have something other than despair and grief to speak of? It's in that moment [of darkness] that you're driven to your knees and you believe. And it's not your problem to solve... I am perfectly comfortable [Lopez says] being in a state of ignorance before something incomprehensible. It's what happens when you're open to the extraordinary circumstances of being alive.

Barry Lopez says that he "wouldn't call it religious" and he probably wouldn't call it "faith". But I would. And whatever you call it, this trust in the Reality beyond human knowing, beyond human control, is part of "leaning into the light". It's part of what keeps us going in the face of all the bad news about our country and our world.

Reverence and a commitment to indiscriminant compassion.

I'll close with a prayer from Forward Movement that I learned as a child. My mother kept it scotch taped into her Bible.

Lord, Give me strength to live another day; Let me not turn coward before its difficulties or prove recreant to its duties; Let me not lose faith in other people; Keep me sweet and sound of heart, in spite of ingratitude, treachery, or meanness; Preserve me from minding little stings or giving them; Help me to keep my heart clean, and to live so honestly and fearlessly that no outward failure [or no bad news] can dishearten me or take away the joy of conscious integrity; Open wide the eyes of my soul that I may see good in all things; Grant me this day some new vision of thy truth; Inspire me with the spirit of joy and gladness; and make me the cup of strength to suffering souls; in the name of the strong Deliverer, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.