July 5, 2026 Independence Day Transferred

Seeing American through God's Eyes The Rev Barbara Ballenger

I don't know if anyone is real liturgy nerd, but today's Scriptures are actually not the ones assigned to this Sunday, the sixth Sunday after Pentecost. Rather they are the readings assigned to the 4th of July. Our bishop, Daniel Gutierrez, asked the diocese to move the readings appointed for Independence Day to today so that we could reflect on our civic role in the light of the nation's 250th birthday.

The bishop wrote: "Our ancestors in faith in this diocese were leaders during that time of turmoil and uncertainty. Now, that leadership falls to us as we endeavor to live as disciples of Christ in this present moment in the life of our country, one that is marked by political division, upheaval, and war."

As we mark 250 years as a nation, it's good to remember that the Episcopal church was born alongside our country, and it was torn and shaped by the same things that tear and shape nations – war, identity, loyalty and a distinct opinion about what constitutes freedom. Most of our founders were Anglicans. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson served on their parish vestries. So keep that in mind when a member of the vestry search committee asks you to consider running for the position in January.

With the Revolutionary War, Anglicans whose families had lived here for hundreds of years had to decide whether to stay in this country and break ties with the Church of England, or to leave for places where they could maintain those allegiances. The Episcopal Church that developed alongside our infant democracy shared the country's aspirational values of equality of life, liberty and happiness, of a more perfect union. Perhaps because it was being designed and shaped by the same people who were writing declarations and constitutions and Federalist papers, the church mirrored this country's structure of national and local governance in its own decision-making structures.

But that is our church structure. At the heart of us, our allegiance is not to a country or particular political agenda, but to the Gospel of Jesus and to the life that Gospel demands. As followers of Jesus we are required to look through the lens of the Gospel to examine all that comes before and to respond to it with God's sense of love and justice.

Our readings today describe that lens very well. They invite us to look through the eyes of a God who "is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing." This is the biblical formula that places the treatment of the little ones of God, the *anawim,* as the measure by which the faith of Israel will be judged. It is a lens found in the law of Israel. You'll find this value threading through both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures.

The Gospel of Matthew calls us to an even more radical act: to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors.

I'm not sure which body assigned these readings to Episcopal celebrations of Independence Day. It was not lost on our bishop that these are the fighting words of faith on the nation's 250th birthday. They are deeply ironic, challenging, and they make us look at the celebration and its trappings with a different eye altogether. If we're honest.

St. Peter's is a porous place. All sorts of secular and civic celebrations find their way into our liturgies. We tout our sports teams with jerseys and sometimes full regalia. We make space for civil holidays like Memorial Day and Veteran's Day and Independence Day.

Today Dave Kipphut has set up a table in honor of the nation's 250th birthday with a flag and a copy of the Declaration of Independence and some flowers. We will sing America the Beautiful as our closing hymn, though this is less a hymn addressed to God than to the country. And our postlude evokes an international call of workers to resist tyranny.

Our identity as Americans, which is indeed diverse and cut of international cloth, invites these rituals in. Our identity as Christians insists that we regard them through the eyes of Christ, through the lens of the Gospel. And sometimes that lens makes things visible that may not be apparent or particularly welcome in the wider celebration. It may bring into light things we'd rather not look at.

Sometimes the Gospel rains on our parade.

Especially when it prompts us to read all the way to the end of the Declaration of Independence to notice that our forefathers did not consider the indigenous population to be among those whom God created equal.

As we sing the 1893 hymn America the Beautiful today the Gospel lens might make us wonder whether those who lived here before the European pilgrims set their feet on this ground regarded it as wilderness in need of a thoroughfare of freedom. Perhaps this land was already home. Perhaps its residents were already free.

The Gospel lens confirmed and amplified Frederick Douglass's deep indignation around the Fourth of July holiday, which he laid bare in a 1852 speech [1] that he made before the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society of Rochester, New York. "What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July?," he asked his northern white audience. "I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim."

Douglass gave this address on July 5, Princeton Professor Dr Eddie Glaude Jr points out in his book *America, USA: How Race Shadows the Nation's Anniversaries.* That was partly because July 4 was on a Sunday that year and partly because it was dangerous for black people to be out and about on that day. To do so was to become the target of massacres and lynchings. For African Americans, July 5 had become a better day to mark freedom as it was the date when New York culminated its legislative actions to end slavery.[2] Today so many people continue to wait for the self-evident truths of equality to

[1] "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" Frederick Douglass, July 5, 1852.
[2] Listen to his June 29, 2026 interview with Amy Goodman on Democracy Now

be made manifest and for rights of life, liberty and happiness to be available to all. So much easier declared than done.

When our civic holidays enter our place of worship on a Sunday, the lens of the gospel and the eyes of Christ will not let us look away from painful truths, because they pull us in the direction of the reconciliation and forgiveness and national healing that our country truly needs.

Wanting this for America is an act of love. It is not idolatrous to love our country, which is truly beautiful in its vast geography, its astonishing diversity of culture and color, its rich resources, its capacity for democracy and its insistence on its freedoms. It is not a sin to love America, or as Dr Glaude would put it, to love the people who have made America what it is. Look at it through the lens of the Gospel, through the eyes of Christ, and you will see what God loves and what God desires for this country.

So we can ask God to shed his grace about the place, knowing that with God's grace comes transformation. We can ask God to mend its every flaw, knowing that this doesn't happen by miracle but by popular fiat. We can pray that its liberties will be encased in law, knowing we have work ahead to restore and strengthen that ideal.

We can love America as God loves it – with an unblinking eye, that sees its whole messy reality and works to foster a time when all who live within or cross its borders are truly free.