



O Say Can You See

Mo. Cooper's Sermon
November 11, 2018

She opened by singing:

“O say can you see by the dawn’s early light,
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming
Whose broad stripes and bright stars through the perilous fight,
O’er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming.
And the rockets’ red glare,
The bombs bursting in air,
Gave proof through the night
That our flag was still there.
O say does that star spangled banner yet wave
O’er the land of the free
And the home of the brave.”

(In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.)

Did you know that there’s a rule against cleaning the American flag? Somebody told me that! They said: “It’s against the rules to clean the flag.” What sense does that make? What could be more respectful than cleaning something important after it got dirty?

You know, this year, the Diocese of N.Y. has set out on a three (3) year process in an attempt of its own to cleanse, to expunge, the spiritual grime that has accumulated on our Diocese during and after the practice of slavery in this nation. It was voted upon a couple of years ago at Convention and now in 2018 - we begin the process.

Now three (3) years may sound like a long time to focus on long past sins but true healing is a long process and the wounds of racism are deep in this nation.

So, in this, our first year of cleansing, we lament. Together (Black and White) we remember, we mourn, we grieve over the lost potential of generations subjugated, over broken trust between people of faith, over human dignity denied and trampled, and over the warped reality we have accepted as normal.

As Christians we believe that God has given people free will and the Bible reveals that throughout time God has honored that original plan for humanity - (even when intervention might have seemed wise).

Yet, in this country, one people took free will from another people by enslaving them thereby doing something even the Creator has never done! And this transgression has stained us - even generations later we are stained with shame!*Shame on the part of those who benefited from slavery

*And in some cases, shame on the part of those who have lost their rightful advantages as a result of slavery.

— And because of this shame, we don't talk about it - especially not in church.

Now, don't get me wrong - I know that none of us believes in slavery and some of us may even have ancestors who fought to eliminate slavery 260 years ago.

But even so, the echo of this great wrong affects us - in the past, we may have seen slavery as a Southern issue. But, as the Bishop mentioned when he preached at the 150th Anniversary Evensong, it is not a Southern issue, it is an American issue! After the importation of slaves from Africa to the U.S. was declared illegal in 1807...the port of N.Y. was still accepting slave ships and trading in human lives as late as 1854 (and, I might add, banks and insurance companies like J.P. Morgan Chase, Aetna, and N.Y. Life were all benefiting greatly from that trade!)

Further, once the Civil War started in 1863, N.Y. experienced “Draft Riots” where, for 3 days, white working class men (most of them Irish immigrants) went to the streets in anger and frustration at being drafted to fight while wealthy men were spared. Now, did these rioters go after the wealthy or the bankers...No, they attacked black citizens and abolitionists. But by the time the riots were over 11 African American men had been lynched in N.Y. City, and a hundred or so various other people had been killed as well.

We were a nation...a city in crisis. But where did this stem from? What had caused it?

Well - long before the colonies were established, slavery was built into the exploration of the Americas. You see, all the competing European powers (Portugal, Holland, Spain, England and France) were invading Africa to obtain free labor in order to facilitate their colonization of the “New World.”

So, by the time of the American Revolution, the southern agrarian colonies already had economies which were totally dependent on free (slave) labor - and New York (a banking town) did lots of business with the southern colonies so we were dependent too. Further, this nation’s founders like Thomas Jefferson (who wrote “all men are created equal”) were slave owners - and in Jefferson’s particular case, even the father of slave children. So, as they say these days - the situation was “complex.” And to this day, it remains complex because complex situations lead to complex feelings, and complex feelings are sticky and hard to cleanse.

But it is 2018 - and finally we are talking.*1. The culture is producing films like “12 Years a Slave.” Thank God the “Gone With the Wind” days are over.*2. Sports figures are taking one knee to raise nation awareness.*3. Episcopal Dioceses like Newark and New York sponsor anti-racism training.*4. And at REPAIR our local anti-racism initiative I have seen people awakening - just as I have been shaken to a deeper understanding of my part in

racism by these monthly meetings. So this year we lament ... it is a start.

You know, I started this reflection by mentioning the person who told me "An American flag should never be cleaned" but - you know what --I looked that up and it's not true. There are lots of rules about our flag but "no dry cleaning" is not one of them. And I am glad to know I am right because there is nothing more respectful than cleaning something important after it has gotten dirty.

Some may look at our history and tell us it's too late now - that ship has sailed, the die is cast. But that is just an excuse for passivity.

God has made us free. God has given us choice. The historic white choices of greed, willful innocence and silence have not served us well, neither as a nation nor as a people.

Now is the time to clean our flag if it is important. It is time to lament, then repent and to repair. Because knowing how we got here is not enough and feeling sorry is just a beginning.

And whatever others are doing around us at this time our own path is clear before us because the cleansing of our flag begins right now, right here, with us.

And may God bless and guide us. Amen.