

Who are your neighbors? Do you know them? Do you interact with them? We do to some extent, but nothing like it was when I was growing up. I believe I have shared with you that I grew up in a tight-knit neighborhood with 31 kids in the first 8 houses on Curtis Terrace. You would almost have to try to be bored.

Our concept of neighbor has changed throughout the years but it was still a concern, even in the times of Jesus. He mentioned neighbors on numerous occasions such as in today's Gospel reading from Matthew. You have heard me mention our neighbors here at church, the ones who live in the general vicinity or even our neighbor churches. The internet, communications, and 24/7 news coverage certainly puts us in touch with our neighbors throughout the world.

On this long weekend, we celebrate our country's Independence Day and our psalm reading is most appropriate. We offer our praise to God for our country where all can be free. However, my friend, The Rev. Dr. Ruth Shaver wrote,

“Frederick Douglass offered his brilliant excoriation of “the great sin and shame of America” by vividly demonstrating two things: that

everyone knew at that point how viciously evil and inhuman the enslavement of human beings is and that the Constitution of the United States of America already contained within it the legal, moral, and ethical reasonings to end the practice immediately. Furthermore, Douglass made the theological point that, “That which is inhuman, cannot be divine!”. To him and to the hundreds of thousands of enslaved Americans at the time, then, the Fourth of July was the celebration of an empty promise by a nation without the will to live up to its own ideals.¹”

Are we living up to the ideals enshrined in the Constitution? In church, are we living up to the commands of Jesus in the Gospel to love our neighbor? Now, 173 years later...We have still not lived up to the ideals enshrined in the Constitution. This weekend, nevertheless, we [have seen] celebrations of American pride and patriotism akin to those of 1976 as we continue the countdown to the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. I would love to think that this would spur some national introspection that continues through 2037 and the 250th anniversary of the passage of the Constitution itself, but I

will settle now for an examination of how we balance our faith with our love of this country, which is most assuredly not a Christian nation even though the highest ideals of our faith are embedded in our founding documents.

The simplest balancing answer [could be:] God is the God of all nations and all people, not just the United States of America. “All the earth bows down before you, sings to you, sings out your Name. Come now and see the works of God, how wonderful God is in their doing toward all people.” We are not living in a land chosen for us by God to represent the ideals of God; rather, we are God’s people living on God’s earth and called to make the places we live—town, county, state, country, world—into models of heaven where all God’s people live free with abundance and hope. With this focus in mind, the Fourth of July can be a time of recommitment to the work of building a more just world for all. After all, it’s July 4th everywhere on earth, not just here!” (end of quote)

What a great sentiment as we go forward. We are all called to a recommitment to ensure that we are building a better world for all, right

here in Westfield and Southwick. We definitely have some choices that we have to make. May we steady the course and continue the good works we have begun and will continue to do to bring for the Reign of God here and for an example to everyone around us. Amen.

¹ From “What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?” by Frederick Douglass, found online at <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july-2>

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