

Civil War rages between Saul and David. Of course, there's lots of tragedy on both sides, with people losing beloved ones. In the house of Saul, Abner becomes the powerful right man, as Joab is for David. After Saul dies, his son and heir apparent accuses Abner of betrayal through sex with Saul's consort. Abner gets offended and sends spies to make an alliance with David. There's more cunning and conspiring with power, sex, and military might. Eventually Abner joins David. There's a feast. Then David dismisses him in peace. Except Joab wasn't there to share the grand alliance. He was out raiding the Philistines. He hears what's happened with Abner and goes into a rage. Maybe he has good reason for not trusting Abner. And probably, he's jealous and fears losing his privileged status with David. Scripture says he wants bitter vengeance because Abner killed his brother in battle. So Joab calls Abner back, slips into a side alley with him, as the Bible says, and stabs him in the stomach. David is not pleased. He claims no knowledge of the deed. He curses Joab and his family. That's where we pick up the next scene. Hear what the Spirit may say. {Read 2 Samuel 3:31-39}

This week our nation is 242 years old! I am determined to celebrate! I know everything isn't perfect. Right now, some of us feel inclined to weeping and wailing; some to hailing. Whichever way we lean, we all have concerns. I'm not about to proclaim we're the greatest country ever. Definitely not in the world of

soccer, anyway! Still, despite the negativity in our country, I'm grateful for much that is good in our national life together. While not whitewashing concerns, I'm determined to seek and to celebrate goodness we share, in God's grace.

I'm going to the Chautauqua Institution for study leave this afternoon. This week's theme asks: Who are we as Americans? A recent poll found 71 percent of Americans feel we're losing our beliefs and values that define our common life. Religion, of course, has been a major factor throughout our history. What does it all mean for our democracy, for prosperity of all Americans, for foundational identity we might share?

Friends, as we've talked together about refugees and financial policies, about world trade and diplomacy, needs in our community and more, I sense we want to get beyond fighting about who's right. What can really help? How do we make a real difference together? I'm eager to hear what lecturers will say this week. I expect leaving with a complete summary of our agreed beliefs and values is as likely as the US winning the World Cup! I want to know: how can the spirit of our nation turn from fearful acrimony to joyful celebration?

Today, let's look at our story about David first. Their nation was fighting. Civil war. Assassination. Now mourning lamentation. Is this the way to joy? Well, time and again, scripture tells us God comes amid what's wrong to lead us in right paths. To bring healing for the ailing, food for the hungry, life out of death. Far from virtuous perfection, David's life is filled with selfishness, greed, jealousy, manipulation. Maybe that's why Joab "believes a little well-aimed killing will go further in state policy than a lot of words," as one scholar writes.¹ But David doesn't approve, and we're told repeatedly: he has deniability. Maybe he really grieves Abner's death. At least, we can bet David gets the power of lamentation to unite a nation. As David walks behind Abner's cortege, he affirms Saul's allies who grieve and worry what

will happen now? He says: this did happen. This is wrong. I'll make it right. Each step he takes leads to a way forward together. To healing. To hope.

You see, lament isn't just unceasing sadness; or a guilt-and-blame game as we wallow in all that's wrong, despairing anything will get better. It's more than spewing anger or complaints in a social media echo chamber. Through faithful lament everything gets seen in relation to God's reign, and ego gets out of the equation. We receive God's grace and love. Which helps us recognize what's wrong with our own lives and society. We walk behind a cortege of God's intent for our world. We face reality as it is. Yet, we don't accept that's the way it must be. We keep hope it can be better. When we lament we say: there is another way. We feel determined to pursue it with every step we take—trusting, living right now as if it's true. And more than passing happiness, deep peace settles in and joy arises within.

In that spirit, this week I celebrate the witness of Walter Jones, a Republican Congressman from North Carolina, who's a bit like David. For 14 years, Jones has signed and sent letters to Americans whose son, daughter, or spouse was killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. 12,000 letters, many with handwritten notes. He writes, because he laments voting to authorize the war and enormous suffering caused ever since. He acknowledges that concern for reelection kept him from voting his conscience. A devout Catholic, Jones sees every letter as an act of empathy and hope, and an apology to God.ⁱⁱ This week I celebrate Walter Jones and all who try to lead our nation in that spirit. Other people elected and running for office, petitioning for causes and speaking prophetically, all with courage to humbly admit when they're wrong and hear opposing perspectives, seeking what's best for all.

Friends, I believe some of our nation's best moments have included that kind of lament. Lament about taxes and other abuses fired revolution. Lament about years of civil war fueled reconstruction. Lament about disease and suffering and social

problems sparks innovation. Lamenting what's wrong leads us to reach for what's right, and grace heals us with new life.

The woman with unceasing bleeding must have lamented for years. And despite all religious rules and cultural prejudice to the contrary, she reaches for the fringe of Jesus' special Rabbi prayer cloak. The fringe ... where she's been stuck in society for so long. It's crowded. People jostle Jesus all the time. His closest friends and disciples don't really see her down there. But Jesus senses a connection. And Mark intentionally entwines this story about an unnamed outcast woman with the beloved child of Jairus—a named, privileged, male leader of society. The woman suffers for twelve years. The girl is 12 years old. Both are female, powerless, ritually unclean by blood and death. Every religious reason says Jesus should shun them. Yet for both, his touch brings new life. Though society may segregate, in Jesus Christ they are loved and healed the same. You see, friends, as much as individual healing, these texts proclaim that God's reign in Christ unites us, beyond class, religion, or any other distinction. Healing wounds in our relations as much as bodies. Bringing resurrection.

Parker Palmer connects this message with life in our nation. For inspiration this week I read again his book *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. Sharing stories of heartbreak, he says, can create unexpected bonds. When we find that contrary opinions often arise from parallel experiences, we're more likely to honor differences, and less likely to see another person as an enemy. "Hearts opened by the many sources of heartbreak in American life have the potential to help heal our political process. Such [broken] hearts are the source of what Lincoln called "our bonds of affection," [which allow us] to engage collectively and creatively with issues of [our time]..."ⁱⁱⁱ

That reminds me of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. It was a time when he, like David, served as mourner in chief. Inscribed upon his memorial and our nation's imagination, we hear him urge us:

“With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds ... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.”

Friends, I don't know what beliefs and values will be highlighted at Chautauqua this week. When our Christian faith makes us well, I believe our nation and all nations will be at our best creating, redeeming, sustaining new life for all, more than any one person or group alone. And I believe our personal efforts here and everywhere community are as beautiful as vast mountains, and fields, forests and coasts of our country, and important as whatever happens in Congress and the Supreme Court. So let us go into this week and beyond celebrating all who try to achieve and to cherish Jesus' work of healing individuals and society, which shapes our life together at best. Let us celebrate health care providers and people who feed or shelter and all the ways we care for healing bodies. Let us celebrate all who tutor and counsel and help others navigate our confusing society, healing hearts of fear and anxiety. Let us celebrate all who host gatherings of friends, and all who try to face prejudice, healing strained relationships in all forms. Let us celebrate business owners who care for employees and customers at least as much as their financial bottom line, and contribute generously to health of our community. Lift our voices to celebrate all the ways we try to open the doors of our loving hearts as much as this holy place, to go with joy and connect as kin in Christ with all friends and strangers living around us all the time.

If we all think about beliefs and values that define our nation's identity, we could likely come up with endless people and causes to celebrate. Lift every voice and

celebrate! As we do may we be guided by lamenting realities that are wrong. And by ever trusting in God's grace beyond our wounds, may we reach for healing in relationship with others.

God gathers us together, and through lamentation empowers us to reach for healing, hope, resurrection. Jesus said to the woman: Daughter, your faith has made you well, go in peace. Jesus said with the daughter: Give her something to eat, to nourish abundant life in that trusting faith.

This Wednesday maybe we'll feast on grilled chicken, burgers or ribs, and chips, watermelon and other 4th of July treats. Today we feast on the bread of life and cup of salvation in Christ. Here Jesus says, come get something to eat. Something to nourish the work of God's commonwealth in our community and country. The broken body of Christ given for us. The lifeblood of Christ poured out with sacrificial love for us. Every time we celebrate at this table we're reminded we have reason to lament that something was and is profoundly wrong in our human way through God's world. And yet, dear friends in Christ, our hope is sustained, our courage is renewed, our resolve is strengthened to pursue God's Way, Truth, and Life in Love. This is indeed the joyful feast, we celebrate as the people of God! Then together met, together bound by all that God has done, *we'll go with joy*, to give the world the love that makes us one!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 228.

ⁱⁱ Peter Marty, Editorial in *Christian Century*, June 20, 2018 (<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/publisher/how-rep-walter-jones-has-turned-his-guilt-over-iraq-war-acts-empathy>)

ⁱⁱⁱ Parker Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 5, 60-61.