

“A New Generation”

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Texts: Genesis 24: 34-38,42-49,58-67, and Matthew 11:16-19

“Lean backward and kick forward...” is the quote I most remember from futurist and theologian, Dr. Leonard Sweet. He uses the metaphor of learning to swing and applies it to history—especially for Jesus’ disciples. The point being that in order to “step boldly into the future” Jesus’ disciples are called to lean back and take a look at history, learn from it, and kick forward just like you do to get going on a swing. Especially on this 250th anniversary of the founding of the United States, I thought a very appropriate metaphor for both people of faith and for citizens of our nation. The goal being not to get caught up in a nostalgic past (that is only partially remembered accurately) so much so that we cannot move forward into the future. I believe it is time for a new generation of leadership in many areas of our lives, but to help those leaders take our nation to its next 250 years, and our faith to places only God can imagine, we must make room for those who come behind us (or who have already been born but largely left out) so that we can become the best version of ourselves possible.

In order to do this, we must first look back at our history. Over the course of the year, we hear all kinds of things about our nation’s history. Virtually all are true—from one perspective. There have been some glorious moments in our history, and I’m sure I don’t need to tell you all of them, but many of them have been through battles won, or significant court decisions that have taken our nation to a good place, and great leaders along the way.

Lately, I have been looking more and more at Native American spirituality. If I can pull it together, someday I'd like to visit and learn more firsthand spirituality that may also empower and encourage our own growth in relationship to God. More about that later. To begin this journey, I recently began reading Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz *"An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States."* To say it has been a difficult read would be an understatement, and I encourage you to explore such resources from those not often heard from in relation to our nation's history. The goal is not to destroy our nation and its exceptional stories, but to give them depth and breadth as we hear from our some of the greatest moments celebrated in American history weren't so great from another perspective. You could read other authors who might discuss African American History, womanist and feminist authors from a female perspective, or books and articles written by poor folk. Again, the goal is to "lean back" into our history, but to read it with a fuller lens.

The same is true in reading our Bible, which is not a history book although there are a lot of parallels to world history. You'll find the Bible many stories that are disturbing. Maybe our Genesis story from this morning bothered you. The idea of giving a woman to someone and the exchange of property and such things might even make you angry. At the same time, they are important stories as they are conversations about God ensuring a new generation of faithful people in the ancient near east. The story of the so-called "first family" may not be an historical document per se, but it does lift of much of human and religious history that most people overshadow or just plain ignore. It has been said that we ignore our history to our peril. I believe it is absolutely true.

When it comes to studying the Bible, it is often helpful to enlist in reading commentaries on the passage(s) we are reading. In the case of Genesis, I know of no better commentator than the late Dr. Walter Brueggemann. He has a long history in our United Church of Christ and has been one of the greatest theologians and authors of our time. Dr. Brueggemann rightly identifies that the problem in much of Genesis is about having an heir. I'll tell you right now that there are problems here as often are in our scripture when God's provision for one (according to our Bible) isn't so great for those who are not of our "tribe." In the case here, it is stated specifically that a proper wife could not be found among the Canaanites. In biblical terms, they simply weren't good enough. Their land was seized and the people in Canaan were often killed or at least marginalized. We have our own parallels in American history. At the same time, Brueggemann lifts up for us that "this seemingly 'natural' sequence of affairs consists of more than meets the eye. God is at work here. Only the discerning believer discerns the angel. Others will regard these remarkable events as 'good luck.'" This begs the question of where is God in all of this? Whether in our biblical stories that can confuse and confound us, or in the history and present times of our nation that can do the same.

However, we can take away from the story that life can be accepted and perceived as a gift from [God's] hand. Further, we don't always know the gifts of God in advance. I think it's even more true that what we perceive as gifts may not be, and some of the things we perceive as trials may indeed be gifts. Time only tells and often we only know from the perspective of the future. And rarely do we ever know the gifts of God in advance.

And we are not people who live well, not knowing exactly what is happening. We want control and sometimes we'll give up our own freedom and that of others simply in an effort to control that which is not ours to control in the first place. In talking about scripture, Dr. Brueggemann writes, "[We live in] a culture which grasps for visible signs of faith, which is driven toward scientism, and which falls for too many religious quackeries, this story stands as a foil against easy and mistaken faith." Here's the most important part, "The workings of God are not spectacular, not magical, not oddities. Disclosure of God comes by steady discernment and by readiness to trust the resilience that is present in the course of daily affairs." We are invited to be ready to "be sustained and profoundly grateful when gifts are given." There is nothing wrong with being grateful about that which we have been given.

When it comes to our nation's history, we are invited to be grateful for the gifts that have been given.

At the same time, as we lean back into history and we kick forward into the future, we have to pay attention to the full width and breadth of that history. Like the Canaanites of our Bible, there are those who have been marginalized at the least and outright killed in the "pursuit of happiness" which we are told from our founding documents are for all people. "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal." Would it be the case that this were true for all men—let alone all who are not men.

"We the people..." is the familiar beginning three words of the preamble to our Constitution. Everyone claims to be those people often with completely oppositional

goals, faith traditions, and political actions. What if we knew more of the preamble? There was a point in history that I knew the whole thing by heart. But like many things, my memory isn't so great, so I had to look it up. Anyone know what comes next?

The jokesters among us will say, "Yes, Pastor, what comes next is 'of the United States.'" You are correct, but not what I was looking for. What comes next is, "in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and to our posterity." In the most political statement you'll ever hear from me, I wonder how many people running around promoting "We the People" even have a clue that the purpose of the people is to do things like "perfect union", "establish justice", and "insure domestic tranquility". We don't even have to get to "general welfare." Now I know all of those words have a lot of meaning behind them, but I hope as we lean back into our history—in the broadest sense—we may pass on to a new generation the opportunity, the space, the encouragement, the wherewithal, and the institutions necessary so that this new generation can make us an even greater nation than anyone ever imagined. While we argue about this issue or that issue, may we seek the goal of all people truly being equal, and where we most seek the general welfare of all.

You know Jesus got in trouble for hanging out with the wrong people. If you're not sure, look at the Gospel lesson for today. Jesus was accused of being a drunkard and a glutton and was ridiculed for hanging out with the most hated in his society—tax collectors and sinners. And yet, where was he? Jesus was always found with those who needed love the most. Sometimes they were of the hated class like tax collectors. Sometimes they were

the children who were so ignored in his day. Sometimes it was women of all varieties who needed to know of God's love for them. Sometimes it was a rag-tag group of men we call disciples who didn't really get what it was all about until after Jesus' ascension (even then we could wonder sometimes). Always, though, Jesus' purpose was to include and not just include, but to make someone left out truly belong. That is the work of the faith that bears his name.

So, what will we give as gifts to the new generation who we pray will boldly step into the future having leaned into the past. We must know all our history, and we must learn from it. At the same time, we must not be stuck there. There is a tomorrow that only God knows, but tomorrow is the first day of a future that will take every one of us to live up to the finest of our nation's goals and ideals, which may mean that we need to challenge many of our own assumptions.

"We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union..." We all know that our nation will always be in need of work to make it more perfect. After all, like all human governments and nations, it is made up of imperfect people like you and like me. It is time for soul-searching on what truly makes a nation great. I say to you that I believe that our nation will be at its greatest ever once we live up to the full meaning of our founding documents, but especially the preamble to the Constitution. For I think we all agree that it is the Constitution that forms us, the "sets right the ship" and that makes us who we are. I hope for our next 250 years that we will spend more time working to create a place of justice, and a people who care for the welfare of the other. If we do that, then I see a truly

shining city on a hill that the founder's imagined (borrowing in part from the book of Revelation). To get there will take all of us.

But the truth is we must do this differently than we have for some time. I believe our next generations have some rather innovative ideas about how to get there. But if there is one thing church and state share is that we need to make space for them, listen to them, empower them, encourage them and to know that both institutions will change. Our faith tells us that God will be at work in ways we cannot understand except by looking back. This fourth of July, may we all lean back and kick forward into a future only God can imagine.

Amen.