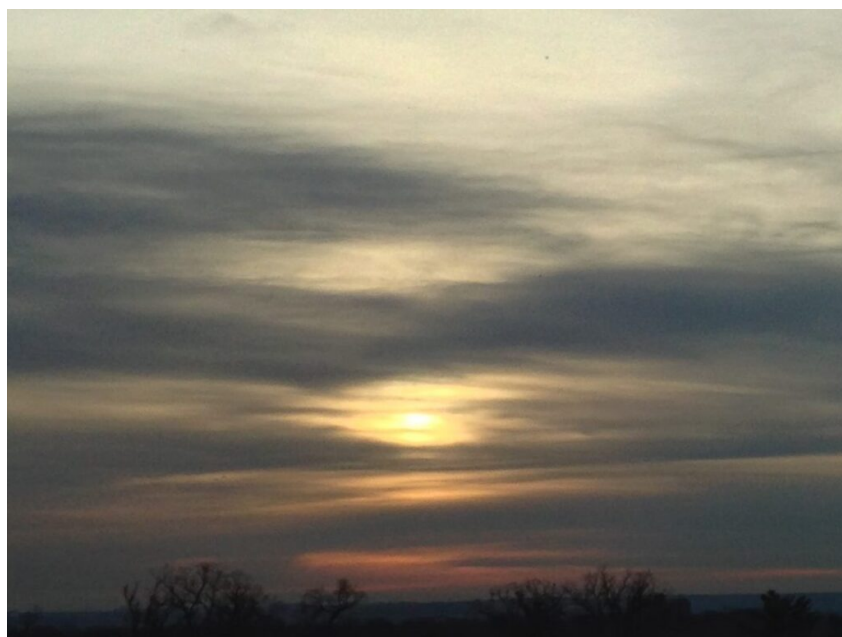


“A Complicated Trinity” by Deborah Sokolove

Third Sunday After Pentecost



June 18, 2023

On this third Sunday of the Trinity season, I want to talk about three very different observances. Today is Father’s Day. Tomorrow is Juneteenth. And all of June is Pride Month. While none of these three secular observances appear on the liturgical calendar, and there is only a glancing connection with the lectionary readings for this week, it does seem to me that it would be wrong to ignore their significance in a congregation where our front windows proclaim our commitment to peace, justice, and creativity.

So, let’s start with Father’s Day. Fathers can be complicated, whether they are called Father God (which is a term I rarely

use, and the subject of a whole other sermon), the fathers of our faith, or our own personal fathers. My father died in 1969, when I was twenty-two. I was living in Israel then, and had no telephone. By the time the news reached me by telegram and I was able to call Los Angeles from a pay phone at the central post office in Jerusalem, the funeral was over and my mother said there was no need for me to come home. Last week, when I was in LA for a few days, I went to the cemetery where he, as well as my mother and her mother, are buried. As I stood there looking at his name and dates of his relatively short life on the headstone, I remembered a man who was brilliant, affectionate, funny, and generous. He was also deeply flawed, with sexist and racist ideas that made me crazy with anger that matched his own when it was clear how much we disagreed. I loved my father more than I can ever say, and long ago forgave him for being a flawed human being who also was the father who loved me beyond measure. While I honor the many men who are good fathers, my main connection with Father's Day for many years was to remind my children to send cards to their fathers who were, of course, my ex-husbands. So, Father's Day is, to say the least, complicated for me.

The Bible recounts similarly complicated stories about our fathers in faith. For most of the summer, the lectionary readings from the Hebrew Bible skip through the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob like stepping stones of faithfulness sticking up out of a raging river of dysfunction, denial, and discord. Like my own father, these men were flawed human beings who did their best to listen to the voice of God, to behave properly to the many people they encountered, and to love the women and children in their lives, while also making a mess of things over and over and over.

In today's reading, 25 years have passed since last week's story of Avram and his household leaving Haram. As nomadic herders, they haven't exactly settled down. Much like the Bedouin who still live on the Sinai peninsula and the Negev

desert of Israel/Palestine, they lived in tents, moving with their flocks and herds from one to another of various grazing areas, according to the season.

In one of the passages that the lectionary skips over, God has changed Avram's name to Abraham and his wife's name to Sarah (I'll spare you the linguistic reasoning), promising that he would be the father of nations and she the mother of kings. In another, Sarah tells Abraham to have a child with her servant, Hagar, which he obligingly does. Then Sarah gets so jealous that Hagar runs away into the desert with the infant Ishmael. There she meets up with the One she calls *The God Who Sees Me*, who tells her to go back to Abraham and Sarah's encampment until the boy is older.

In today's reading, three strangers come by, and 100-year-old Abraham invites them to a meal, an offer of hospitality that would have been expected in that society. As they relax in the shade of some big trees, the strangers turn out to be messengers from God – angels – reminding Abraham of God's promise that 90-year-old Sarah is going to have a baby. Sarah, listening to the men talk from her hiding place behind the tent flap, thinks this is the funniest thing she has ever heard and laughs out loud. Sure enough, a year later, Isaac is born to great rejoicing, and Abraham is assured of his place as the father of our faith.

Wait – but what about Ishmael? Isn't Abraham already his father? Yes, but that is next week's reading. For today, I want to remember that the God who loved Hagar enough to speak directly to her in her desperation is also the God who loved Sarah, despite her jealousy, rage, and fear, giving her a child in her old age; and that same God loved Abraham, the flawed yet faith-filled father of both Ishmael and Isaac. As we struggle to understand what it means to claim this complicated, dysfunctional family as our ancestors in faith, let's move on from Father's Day to the second part of our trinity of secular observances, Juneteenth.

As I hope everyone here knows, Juneteenth National Independence Day is a federal holiday in the United States which commemorates the announcement of the emancipation of enslaved African Americans in Texas, and by extension everywhere in the US, in 1865. While this holiday is particularly important in Black communities, everyone of whatever skin color or ethnic origin should celebrate this important milestone of freedom in our common history. As I still often need to be reminded, Black history IS the history of all of us here in the US, wherever we or our ancestors came from and whenever we or our families got here.

Like many of you who are involved in the Reparations class, I've been reading *Reparations* by Duke Kwon and Gregory Thompson as a way to understand a part of that history and what I and we might do to repair the damage that was done by the practices of slavery and Jim Crow in this country. When I recently mentioned that to a couple of people who are involved in the class, the slightly raised eyebrows and looks of quizzical surprise confirmed my suspicion that since I don't often show up at the weekly racial justice vigil or other activities sponsored by the Racial and Ethnic Justice Team, a lot of Seekers who are more visibly active in those ways assume that I'm not particularly interested. That perception couldn't be farther from the truth – I am very interested in how Seekers addresses the many questions around racial and ethnic justice and very curious about what others members of the community think should or should not be done. However, it is also true that my life often takes me in directions that preclude my participation in Seekers events around these questions. So, since I really wanted to attend and be part of the conversation, but once again the rest of my life makes that impossible, when no one signed up to preach today I took it as a sign that I should say publicly what I have been thinking and feeling as I read the book.

While there are many practical details that must be worked

out, I agree with the authors wholeheartedly that our country should make reparations to the Black community for the evils that slavery inflicted on that community virtually since the first European colonies adopted the practice and later enshrined it into law; and for the ongoing racialized discrimination that kept the people who were freed, their descendants, and other Black people who came to this country later, from fully exercising their rights to vote, own property, conduct business, and live as full, respected members of society. Since the book outlines all of that better than I can, I don't need to go into the details – if you aren't in the class and haven't read the book, please do so.

The reason I can say this so unequivocally is that, since before I can remember, every Passover when I was growing up I was reminded that my people were slaves in the land of Egypt, and now that we were free citizens in a free country, it was our – my – responsibility to make sure that others who had been enslaved or oppressed could become free, also. At my parents' table every year, we read aloud the passage in the Haggadah that says, "In every generation, we are obligated to see ourselves as though we personally came out of Egypt."

As the website Haggadot.com puts it,

More than just ritual observance, we are directed to feel in our own bodies what it might have been like to escape from slavery to freedom. The Exodus story asserts unapologetically that oppression and injustice can and must end, and it lays the foundation for the Jewish vision of a just society.

This yearly reminder is a central tenet of Jewish history and culture. For many of our brothers and sisters, however, there is no need for a reminder of the story they carry. Many Black Americans feel the lasting effects of American slavery in their lives today. Whether they know their family's histories or whether, tragically, that history has been lost over the generations, the enslavement of African-heritage people in

America needs no annual reminder.

For white-skinned Jews, it is important to remember that today in America we are racially privileged. That privilege, as well as our communal story, should propel us forward into the fight for the full equality and humanity of our Black brothers and sisters, especially when they call on us for solidarity.

With anti-Semitism rising at a precipitous rate in this country and around the world, it is probably more correct to say that Jews are White-adjacent rather than exactly, fully White, no matter what we look like. And no matter how long I am a Christian, I will always be ethnically and culturally a Jew who was taught to remember that because my 4000-years-ago ancestors were slaves, my twentieth century relatives were murdered in the Holocaust, and a lot of my ancestors in between were persecuted for their Jewishness, it is my responsibility to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with others who have suffered, who have been and still are oppressed, and to celebrate freedom for others as if I, myself, had been a slave and now am free.

Which brings me, finally, from Juneteenth to this entire month of LGBTQIA+ Pride.

It would be easy to recite the long litany of books and lesson plans about gender non-conformity being banned in too many schools and libraries, trans-affirming medical care being withheld in too many states and localities, and too many churches continue to insist on binary gender norms that make life hell for those who do not fit into their confining categories of behavior and dress. If you pay attention to the news, you already know the dreadful stories, the harrowing statistics, the awful toll all this takes on the real lives of real people, adults and children alike, so I won't even try to name it all.

Instead, I want to simply celebrate the wonder of Pride month. More than fifty years ago, one of my dearest friends transitioned from female to male. In those days, such a change was kept very private, and my friend was lucky to work in a place that allowed him to keep his job without making a big deal of it, and later to marry a woman who loved and accepted him exactly as he was. There were no Pride parades, no rainbow flags or bumper stickers, not even much language to name this momentous change in my friend's identity. And yet, this friend is probably the most emotionally stable, generous, and welcoming of all the adults who surrounded my children as they were growing up and who is an exemplary weather to this own child. And because my children have always known this story, and he has been like a father to them at various points in their lives, I am proud to say that my now middle-aged children have always known that love is love.

These days, like Takoma Park, my DC neighborhood of Mt Pleasant is filled with Pride flags and bunting on private homes and businesses alike. I love to see the large groups of mostly young people wearing rainbow-themed clothing and outrageous makeup walk boisterously along the sidewalks, seemingly unconcerned about whether anyone will be offended because some of them sport full beards along with light, summery dresses. While attire is often a clue – especially during Pride month – you can't always tell by looking at someone if they are gay or straight or bi, cisgender or trans, queer or intersex or asexual, or simply trying to figure out where they fit in an increasingly ambiguous and complicated world of gender expression. We've come a long, long way from my hippy days, when some people would complain, "Is it a boy or is it a girl?" when they would see someone wearing long hair, jeans, and a t-shirt.

I, myself, do not always fit comfortably into the roles that my apparent gender assigns me, so I happily join the celebration that is Pride. At this time in my life, I have no

interest in taking on any of the increasing number of labels that fit under the Pride banner, but at younger ages I would have rejoiced at the language and the opportunity. Now, I just want us to know one another as individuals, with all our quirks and oddness, all our passionate ideas and causes, all our colors and shapes and sizes. Because this, too, is freedom. And God made us all to be free.

So, whoever we are, let's celebrate Pride Month. Let's celebrate Juneteenth. Let's even celebrate Father's Day. Because we are all held together in a great web of love, the eternal weaving in and out of the Holy Trinity: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, in all their disguises and complications. Amen.