

*Let me tell you what I wish I'd known
When I was young and dreamed of glory
You have no control
Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?*

This is how the last song of the musical Hamilton begins. I first saw Hamilton five years ago and I keep coming back to that question, “Who tells your story?” The musical tells the story of Hamilton, the “forgotten founding father,” but it also tells the story of our nation. And that story, the story of who we are as a country and who gets to tell that story is so profoundly important. And depending on who is telling that story, it can sound very, very different.

My dad is a history buff, specifically an American history buff...he loves it, he majored in it, and when I was a kid, he would love to prove his knowledge of history by challenging all of us to family jeopardy – which is every bit as exciting as it sounds.

Actually, it was a lot of fun.

You sit around the TV watching jeopardy and try to call out the answers before the contestants do. Few things gave my dad more pleasure than being able to yell out, “Who is Benjamin Franklin?” before the rest of us could. So, I guess it was only natural that when I was 12 years old or so, Dad decided it was time for our American history vacation – we were going to Colonial Williamsburg.

Now this may be shocking to you, but walking through a replica of an early American settlement with people dressed up as blacksmiths or barrel makers was not exactly the vacation I had in mind as a 12 year old. So my parents made a deal with us – we could do the American history part if we would also include another great American experience: roller coasters. You see, we had a VHS tape of the 10 best roller coasters in America and it just so happened that 2 of them were at the Busch Gardens Williamsburg amusement park. So I figured I could endure any boring day learning about American history for the opportunity to ride the same roller coasters I had seen on my video. It was going to be great. But then, something happened that I didn't expect – I loved the history too, maybe even more than the roller coasters. We got to pretend that we were in the Revolutionary army fighting the British. We heard about heroes – people like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. I felt a deep sense of pride in my country. I was proud to be an American.

After visiting Colonial Williamsburg, we visited Yorktown battlefield, the site where the American army won its final victory against the British. I was excited. I wanted to learn more about the bravery and glory of the Revolutionary army. But some of the images disturbed me. I saw panels that talked about people having their legs blown off, or people being shot and the wound getting infected and so they had to have a limb amputated. I heard stories about the wounded freezing to death in winter. And suddenly, I wasn't so excited about war anymore. My dad set me down and said, “You need to understand this is part of war too. We need to honor those who fight but we should never glorify war. War is horrific.”

I was confused. I was still proud to be an American. And on the one hand, I felt deep gratitude for the soldiers who, throughout history were willing to suffer and die in such an extreme way for the sake of our country. But I also couldn't help thinking that no one should ever have to suffer in that way – not our soldiers and not the soldiers of our enemies. I think I was beginning to realize that patriotism was complicated and sometimes when, in the name of patriotism, we celebrate harm to our enemies, well then our patriotism comes into contradiction with our faith. Since then, I've learned that the use of force, like patriotism, is complicated. Through war, we freed slaves, through war we stopped Hitler, through war we gained our independence. But also through war we've propped up dictators, through war we've armed the very terrorists who would later orchestrate 9/11, and through war we've killed children with drone strikes. And in all of these cases – whether the end goal was noble or not, war has caused immense suffering to our soldiers and their families, to our enemy's soldiers and their families, and to all civilians who were caught in harms' way.

The Sunday near 4th of July is always a complicated day for us as a church—or at least it should be. On the one hand, it's normal that on the day before our nation's birthday, we want to celebrate it. But, there's a danger that we, particular in a place of worship, could cross the line between celebrating and worship. No matter how much we love our country, we must remember that we are called to worship God, and God alone – it's the first of the 10 commandments.

It's also a fine line between expressing our deep love for our nation and for turning a blind eye to our shortcomings. That journey continued for me on that same family vacation as we ended it by touring Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home. Again, I felt deep pride. The estate was beautiful. I was blown away by his brilliance. I was moved by the words he penned in the Declaration of Independence. I thought our nation's ideal that Jefferson so beautifully articulated, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," was the highest ideal any nation could ever have. I still think that.

But then we visited the slave quarters. And my 12 year old mind couldn't comprehend how the same person who wrote "all are created equal and have God give rights of life and freedom" could also own other human beings. Again, my dad had a talk with me. He told me that he wanted me to see this because I needed to understand all of my nation's history. He went on to tell me that love does not mean looking past shortcomings. In fact, he said that part of love is to try to fix those shortcomings – that just as his love for me compelled him to try to correct me when I was wrong, so too does our love for our country mean that we not only celebrate it, but that we try to correct what is wrong. And I think that is why it is so important for us as people of faith to be honest about what tomorrow means for us, to listen to the whole story.

Friends, we are the country of the Declaration of Independence, the country that became the catalyst for spreading democracy throughout the world, the country of freedom of religion and

speech. But we are also the country that was built on slaughtering indigenous people and enslaving black people. We are the country of segregation and family separation. If we believe that the Declaration of Independence continues to impact who we are as a people, then we also have to accept that the fact that the author of that document and many like him owned slaves also continues to impact who we are as a people. We can't celebrate one without acknowledging the other.

It's been nearly 30 years since I went on our American history vacation. And over the years, I've wrestled with this tension that I've named. The ideals of our nation are indeed something to be proud of, the values of democracy and freedom are, I believe, God-given. But the problem has been who our nation has decided to include in those ideals. They are for all people, except Native Americans, or African Americans, or immigrants, or gay people...and so on and so forth. And I think the problem we have is one of fear. We humans tend to fear that if someone else has access to the things we have, then there may not be enough for us. So we can justify treating others as less than human out of that fear – slavery is an economic necessity (Jefferson's justification), or immigrants will cost us jobs, or we will lose our traditional understanding of the family, of our country.

But I think our gospel lesson has something to teach us about fear and about who is included. On the one hand, we have Jairus, the leader of the synagogue, one of the most respected people in town. Everyone knew that he was loved by God and that his daughter deserved every opportunity to be healed. And then we have a nameless bleeding woman, a woman who would have been considered unclean and therefore considered less than, not part of the community, a woman whose life did not matter as much as Jairus' daughter – or so everyone thought. But Jesus had a different idea. The woman touched him and she was healed but Jesus didn't think his work was done. He stopped. In asking, "Who touched me?" he gave her the opportunity to tell her story.

Notice how profound this is. You see, she had been healed physically, but Jesus knew she still carried the pain of the last 12 years, the pain of her disease, but even more, the pain of being excluded, cut off from community. That kind of pain cannot be healed simply by removing the disease. That kind of pain can only be healed when she's given the opportunity to tell her story. Jesus made Jairus wait and he let her tell her story. And then he called her Daughter. Before, the only thing she was called was unclean. But now Jesus gave her the ultimate name of inclusion – daughter – you're part of my family. Jesus needed her to know that her life mattered as much as Jairus' life.

But he also needed Jairus to know that as well. You see, as the head of the synagogue, Jairus was responsible for overseeing the very system that labelled her as unclean. Before Jesus healed Jairus daughter, he needed to heal Jairus of the idea that God's love is only for some, the idea that only some are deserving of healing. And so Jairus heard her story. It all goes back to that question, "Who tells our story?"

Friends, it is so important that we hear the stories of those who have not found America to be the land of the free – to hear the stories of those who have not been able to experience the ideals our nation was founded upon – not because we don't love our country but because we love it so much, we want all people to experience the very best of our ideals.

By hearing those stories, just as Jairus and the crowds heard the bleeding woman's story, so too can we begin the process of moving from blind patriotism to what I would call true patriotism, a patriotism that celebrates that which is good while working to fix what is broken, while working to make sure that all people in our land are treated equally and have access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

But this is not an easy thing to hear. I imagine Jairus almost being in a panic as he was waiting for Jesus to be finished with the bleeding woman while his daughter was dying. I imagine him thinking, "Don't you know who I am – you're supposed to help me first and then if you have time, help her." I imagine Jairus saw this woman as taking away something that he deserved.

Isn't that fear the root of so much our division in our country? They're (whoever they may be) are going to take away my country, going to take away my freedom, going to take away my opportunity. I don't mean this to be critical. It's a genuine fear. I have that fear sometimes.

But then we read to the end of the story and we find out that Jairus daughter was raised from the dead after all. You see, there was enough grace, enough healing for both Jairus' daughter and the bleeding woman. The lie that Jairus believed, the lie that is so tempting for us to believe, is that there's not enough for all of us --- that if one group that has been historically left out is included, then somehow we might not be.

But that's not true.

There is enough for all of us. We don't have to limit who should experience life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. There is enough for all of us. And when we truly live into that, when we truly build a nation where all people have access to the ideals our founders dreamed of, then we are living into the great hope of America.

This Independence Day, may we resist the temptation to celebrate only the part of our story that makes people like me feel good. May we hear our whole, unvarnished, un-sanitized story as a people. May we hear the story from the perspective of people like the bleeding woman.

And may we always be grateful for the country in which we call home, may we celebrate that which is good, and, precisely, because we love it so much, may we work to fix that which is broken.