

The Fourth of July: How does a Christian celebrate?

by [Ted A. Smith](#) in the [July 1, 2008](#) issue

On July 4, 1976, I was one of the smallest soldiers in the Revolutionary Army. In that year bicentennial fever swept through the U.S., and I caught an especially acute case. Soldiers from George Washington's army occupied my bedspread. The seal of the Continental Congress dignified the rug at the center of my bedroom. Reproductions of recruiting posters for revolutionary militias were plastered on my wastebasket. On the Fourth I put on a tricorn hat, rolled up my Toughskins jeans to turn them into knee breeches, donned my mom's ruffled blouse and grabbed my musket so that I could march with about a hundred other white suburbanites in our neighborhood parade. That day was not just about patriotism. It was also about fitting in, dressing up, eating ice cream and spitting watermelon seeds. I didn't really know what I was doing, but I loved this revolutionary country.

I still do. I love the principle that all people are created equal. I love the promise that all people here shall be free to speak their minds and worship their gods. I love the old call to be a city on a hill, a light to the nations. I love the demands of government of, by and for the people.

On July 4, 1989, I was serving burgers and beers to a bunch of college students, gay men and Republican staffers. Those three distinct but overlapping groups made up most of the regulars at the Capitol Hill bar where I worked nights and holidays that summer. During the days I was working at the Bureau of Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs of the State Department. I was trying to make the U.S. into the country I thought I had marched for back in 1976.

I thought I had marched for a country that would be a light to the nations. Instead we were training death squads to terrorize people in El Salvador, selling weapons to Iran to fund a revolution against the democratically elected government of Nicaragua, trading freely with an apartheid-dominated South Africa, and propping up a vicious dictator in Iraq named Saddam Hussein. And that was just our foreign

policy. We had millions—millions!—of people with unlivable housing or no housing at all. Some of them came to the patio of the bar and asked for food. A crack epidemic raged. The president had won the election in large part by playing on white Americans' fears of African-American men and promising to get tough. It is tempting to blame one party or one politician for these failings. But the years since that summer have made clear just how deeply and widely they are woven into the life of our nation.

This was not the nation I had marched for as a child. Instead of shining like a city on a hill, we were acting in ways that could not survive disclosure. Forgetting our faith that all people are created equal, we were undertaking policies that sought to widen and legitimate inequalities of many kinds. But we still had—and have—those ideals. We have the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Statue of Liberty. Our State Department has a Bureau of Human Rights that in spite of every attempt at political manipulation often really works for human rights. The promises of this country have a certain staying power. Even when we want to undermine those promises, or get around them, we tend to appeal to them for ideological cover. And so they endure. In the summer of 1989 I wanted to work to help the United States live up to those enduring promises. I still do.

On July 4, 1996, I was serving as the pastor of two Presbyterian congregations in rural New York. I had spent the years since my time in D.C. studying theology, and I was no longer so sure about America's ideals. It was not just that we did not live up to our high standards, but that the standards themselves were wrong.

I learned this in my own congregations. One of the churches I served was a very small country congregation. There were occasional session meetings, but the real decisions got made by a small group of people who met in the home of one longtime member. They were not elected. They kept no records. They took no votes. Not everyone was invited. That was not very Presbyterian. It wasn't very democratic, either. New members felt like they had no say. They said the church's process wasn't fair, and they were right. So I dragged that church into a Presbyterian system. We moved to stated session meetings, open to all, with discussions, votes, minutes, budgets, and elections. Democracy.

But a funny thing happened on the way to justice. The new members were engineers and health care professionals and middle managers who had moved into the area. They loved the new style and thrived in the meetings. But the old members—usually

with less income, less formal education, and deeper country roots—didn't really take to the new system. It wasn't their style. They checked out. And so what I thought were democratic processes led to a transfer of power to a group that already had more power in other spheres. The democratic process that I thought was a neutral playing field was the home turf of the middle class.

If pastoral experience raised questions internal to democracy, theological study pushed me to question the whole experiment. Why should Christians support human rights? We worship a Christ who did not count equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. We claim connection to the church of Acts 2, which demanded that people relinquish their rights and share their possessions. We see ourselves as heirs of Ambrose of Milan, who said: "You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich." Talk of human rights seems to leave the example of Jesus behind. It works best when we forget the church, except as a committee of our own creation. It usually depends on an idolatrous understanding of individuals as the source of creative power and so deserving of whatever we produce.

It is tempting to suggest that we might separate human rights like those enshrined in the First Amendment from individual property rights. But attempts to make a very strong form of this distinction have not been sustainable. And in this country at least, we have created a society in which rights to private property and rights to free expression are inseparable both in practice and as ideals. Human rights are part of a larger complex that helps create, sustain and legitimate inequality.

Such thoughts were in the forefront of my mind on July 4, 1996. I took no holiday. I celebrated the Fourth like a Puritan of the old school celebrated Christmas: I went about my business as conspicuously as I could. I prayed for the country and then did my daily work as pastor. I questioned not just whether the U.S. was living up to its ideals, but whether those ideals were worth living up to at all. I still do.

Just before the Fourth of July in 2003 I was asked to consult with Emory University's Youth Theological Initiative about how they might celebrate the holiday. To describe myself as a consultant makes it all sound grander than it was. I was a graduate student at Emory, and the director of YTI was a friend. I was available at low cost on short notice.

The YTI community was deeply divided. Some of them believed that celebrating the Fourth by celebrating America was an important expression of their Christian faith. Others believed that the day made an idol of the nation and so should be avoided. Most fell somewhere in between, or at some angle to, these two vocal poles. I listened as much as time allowed.

Then I had to say something. I told them the story of my own markings of the Fourth of July. And I told them what I had learned since 1996. I told them that my time in a multiracial congregation had brought me into more intimate and truthful conversations with black people than I'd ever enjoyed before, and that my work to open my denomination to the gifts of all those whom God calls to ministry had brought me into frank and sustained conversations with gay and lesbian Christians. In the course of these conversations I often heard variations on one very clear theme: Let's make sure everyone gets a full share of those rights you are so wary about before you try to throw them away on behalf of all of us. Rights like those promised by the Constitution might play no part in God's best hope for social relationships, but they might have some role to play this side of the Great Day. And for those with eyes to see, they might even testify to hopes greater than they themselves can offer.

I also said that I had come to believe that we could not opt out of this country. In my first months as a pastor I had wanted to withdraw into a community of the pure, a band of radical disciples shaped only by the stories of the Bible and the practices of the church. But even if such withdrawal could be achieved, it would exemplify the Constitution's right to free religious exercise. Critique of the United States not only exercises the freedom of speech promised by the United States, but also taps into some of the nation's deepest traditions. We cannot invent new lives that are completely outside of or apart from this nation. The idea that we can is one of its most fantastic promises.

I told the youth and adults that I had come to think about my country like I think about my family of origin. They are not perfect, but I can't really leave them. Most of the time rebellions against our families are just ritual enactments of old family dramas. We are never more a part of our families than when we think we are leaving. But more than that: I have come to love my family fiercely. They show me the same grace, and then some. I've come to think that the members of my family have been given to me to love, just as I have been given to them. We belong to each other, for better and for worse, by the grace of God. And so I love my country like I

love my family—as that which has been given to me to nurture, chastise, wrestle with, care for, raise up, suffer beside, celebrate with, and love. Of course I remember its birthday.

That year I tried to celebrate the Fourth as a chastened, realist, radical, democratic Christian. I wanted to host a party that featured prayerful, raucous conversation between people who seemed very different from one another. I hoped for a conversation in which no question was out of bounds, in which we asked not just how we should achieve freedom, democracy or human rights, but if those ideals were even worth pursuing at all. Such conversations can be risky, but we can enter into them with the confidence that God will make something of this country and our conversations. If God can use Joseph's brothers, if God can use Cyrus, if God can use even a cross, even *Rome*, then surely God can take up our country in the work of redemption. That was my hope and prayer. It still is.

The 2003 party of realist, democratic Christians was a little full of itself, like most grad school parties. It was a good enough time, but the crowd at the bar in D.C. in 1989 was more diverse and its banter got to more basic questions. And the 2003 party of obliquely hopeful realists needed a shot of clarity, piety and courage from the uncompromising pastor of 1996. It needed the intern's energy for reform. And it needed the easy idealism of a true believer in the promises of this nation, someone like an eight-year-old minuteman who could sing the preamble to the Constitution to a tune learned from Schoolhouse Rock. We eschatologically minded realists miss something when we give up on songs, parades, radical critique, and attempts to embody the reign of God. We make our resignation into a badge of sophistication. We adjust ourselves too readily to this world. We hope for too little in this age.

I would not want to renounce any of these celebrations of the Fourth, even if I could. On the contrary, feeling the pinch of their incompleteness, I would add to their number other faithful attempts to mark this day. I am convinced that by the grace of God our separate stumblings through the Fourth become like stars in a constellation—or on the bright blue field of a flag. They play off of one another to suggest something more than any of them could embody alone. In and in spite of themselves, they bear witness to a hope that is just beyond what they can articulate, even all together. And they call us to the complex, plural, faithful politics that hope makes possible.