

Daily Meditation 02-26-24

The Holiness and Greatness of Frederick Douglass

Good morning.

We're meditating today on the Spirit and the gifts from Frederick Douglass, and courage, devotion to justice, and so much more that he left behind.

What I share with you today, is his most famous talk, and he gave many, many very fine talks. This is called "The Meaning of July 4 for the Negro," delivered in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852. It's been called a scathing indictment of American hypocrisy, a critique of a nation claiming to hold dear the principles of freedom and equality. So I'll share parts of this amazing talk, with you.

The papers and placards say, that I am to deliver a Fourth of July oration. This certainly sounds large and out of the common way, for it is true that I have often had the privilege to speak in this beautiful hall, and to address many who now honor me with their presence.

The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, the distance between this platform, and the slave plantation from which I escaped, is considerable — and the difficulties to be overcome in getting from the latter to the former, by no means slight. That I am here today, is to me a matter of astonishment as well as of gratitude.

For the purpose of this celebration, the Fourth of July, it is a birthday of your national independence and of your political freedom. This to you is what the Passover was, to the emancipated people of God.

(Very interesting theological intervention, about Exodus and the Passover.)

It carries your minds back to the day and to the act of your great deliverance, and to the signs and to the wonders associated with that act, and that day.

Then he talks about how young America is, when he's 76 years old on that day, and how it's still in its childhood. He talks about the oppression the Americans underwent vis-à-vis England, that triggered, of course, the Revolution.

Oppression makes a wise man mad, he said. Your fathers were wise men. And if they did not go mad, they became restive under this treatment. They felt themselves the victims of grievous wrongs, wholly incurable in their colonial capacity. With brave men, there is always a remedy

*for oppression. Just here [in Rochester NY], the idea of a total separation of the colonies from the Crown, was born. It was a startling idea, much more so than we, at this distance of time, regard it. The timid and the prudent, as has been intimated in that day, were of course shocked and alarmed by it. Some people hate all changes. But silver, gold, and copper change. **This** sort of change, they are always strongly in favor.*

Little bit of digging humor there. He says,

*Fellow citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask: why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? The great principles of political freedom and of natural justice embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to **us**? And am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits, and express devout gratitude, for the blessings resulting from your independence, to **us**? Would to God, both for your sakes and ours, that an affirmative answer could be truthfully returned to these questions. Then would my task be light, and my burden easy and delightful. For who is there so cold, that a nation's sympathy could not warm him? Who so obdurate and dead to the claims of gratitude, that would not thankfully acknowledge such priceless benefits?*

*But such is not the state of the case. I say it with a sad sense of disparity between us. I am **not** included within the pale of this glorious anniversary. Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.*

To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today? If so, there is a parallel in your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrevocable ruin. I can today take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people.

Then he quotes from the scriptures,

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yes, we wept when we remembered Zion. we hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive, required of us a song, and they who wasted us, required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,

let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.

This is a long talk, and it's very, very rich.

How should I look today, in the presence of Americans, dividing and subdividing a discourse, to show that men have a natural right to be free? Speaking of it, relatively and positively, negatively and affirmatively? To do so, would be to make myself ridiculous, and to offer an insult to your understanding. There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven, that does not know that slavery is wrong for him.

Thank you. We'll see you next week.