

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I, surprisingly, found myself at a baseball game on the 4th of July, which is about as American as you can. The game isn't really the point of this sermon, though as an aside I will tell you it was very exciting with a Brewers four-run comeback and two extra innings. I actually want to talk about the pregame festivities. Because it was the 4th of July, it was a fuller than usual pre-game. National anthem. Helicopter flyovers. Veterans throwing out pitches, and even a giant flag unfurled across the entire outfield. Oh, and there were some fireworks, even though it was midday. But what struck me most was a video they played. It was up on the huge screen, and the movie started with a reminder that the semiquincentennial—the 250th anniversary—of the signing of the Declaration of Independence is coming up in 2026. The actor narrating the video was urging all Americans to gear up and get ready to honor this important milestone in our nation's history. He said this while a combine drove over the amber waves of grain and a huge bald eagle screeched across the sky. It was a little much, and I prepared to tune out for a few minutes.

At this point, I have to talk about a part of myself that I don't typically share in a sermon. I like to keep a bit of distance between my personal life and my professional life, but in this case, I think the blurring of those lines a little can help us understand the gospel story today a little better, so I'll risk it. One of the reasons that I tune out most things that are overtly patriotic is not because I wasn't taught to love the country—I was. My dad was a veteran, and once, my mom literally wouldn't let my brother and I go play with our friends until we could recite the entire national anthem. So patriotic values were taught in my home. But as an adult, I quickly realized that the America that I was taught to respect was not actually built for me. As a sexual minority in this county, I learned that the laws around marriage and sexuality were written to disadvantage and often criminalize my life. And so, at some point, I sort of made peace with the idea that our founding documents did not include me and that our government is hostile to me at worst and ambivalent to me at best. I'm guessing that most queer people go through something like this, and I have to imagine that women and people of color also have to figure out their own accommodations with the dominant culture in our country. So, now, maybe it makes more sense why I was so ready to tune out the video as the patriotic music swelled and they started showing old-timey paintings of the founding fathers and the battle of Lexington and Concord. So imagine my surprise when the video said something about the forced removal of Native Americans from their land. And then it highlighted the casual cruelty of the Jim Crow South and the plague of chattel slavery. I kind of couldn't believe what I was seeing. We were at a ballpark on the 4th of July, and there was a video that laid out some of the greatest sins of the American experiment in front of everyone. I'm so used to our patriotism being a gloss on our history, that I was stunned the narrator said out loud, on Independence Day, that there have been real, terrifying human costs in our story.

And then, and this is really the heart of the gospel for me this morning, they showed a picture of the Stonewall Inn in New York. For those of you who don't know, Stonewall was a bar frequented by sexual minorities and gender nonconforming folks in the 60s, and in 1969, after a raid, the patrons rose up in rebellion against the police—gay kids and drag queens and trans

people—fighting armed officers. This was the spark that blazed into a fully formed gay rights movement, of which I am a direct beneficiary. But here's the thing: when I was growing up, Stonewall was a sort of secret knowledge really known only to other gay people and whispered to one another. The reason we have Pride festivals in June is to commemorate those riots, but most people don't know that. It was always a part of history that was covered up by the larger narrative of the greatness of America.

So, knowing what you now know about this history and about my own life, please imagine what it was like to look up, on the 4th of July, at a baseball game, in Wisconsin, and see myself invited into the story of America in a way I don't remember ever being invited before. I absolutely welled up.

Jesus says: Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

The church has its own gnarled history. And it has its own problems with telling the truth about its story. And the church has historically had a hard time getting its big red doors open wide enough for everyone. But that is precisely what our founding was about. As Jesus taught his friends along the way, he reached out to the poor, the disenfranchised, the women, the Samaritans, the tax collectors, the sex workers, and anyone who had been stepped on or kicked out of the centers of power in Jerusalem. Come to me, he says, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. We need to get these words carved into the stone above the doors of our churches or maybe worked into the design of the new parish hall. This is the message. This is the gospel. And as I sat at that ballpark, seeing myself invited into a story that I am usually excluded from, I had a real sense of the gravity of the work we are called to do in the church. We are to seek out the least and the lost and to remind them that they are part of us; they are members of the same Body of Christ. This is the room in which to lay down burdens and to be healed. We are an incomplete church without everyone around the table. We have to be honest about the places we have fallen short of Jesus' vision, and in every generation strive to be more like Christ in our welcome of the stranger. And, as we think about this holy work, let us not underestimate its importance in the lives of those who walk through these doors. It can be life and death. As Christians, we are not allowed to tell a partial story of God's redeeming work. It is our duty to show the whole video around here—the one in which everyone, everyone, everyone gets to be up on that screen, showing us a story a little closer to the one Jesus told. Amen.