

“Democracy”

Delivered to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Roanoke on Sunday, July 5, 2026 by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

When I was a kid, Independence Day was not made much of in my family. We did not attend fireworks displays; my mother hated them. We did not travel into Washington, D.C., to join in the national celebrations held there each year; my father was a career civil servant and said he “spent plenty of time in D.C. already, thank you very much.” Perhaps we held a cookout, but it wasn’t necessarily in direct celebration of the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence so much as it was because my father liked to cook on the grill, and all of us got what I would describe as an outsized sense of pleasure and satisfaction from potato salad. As I grew older, I grew to enjoy fireworks, at least a little, though my pacifist’s heart still thought these simulations of artillery fire were a bit upsetting. For a few memorable years, when I was employed by the government of the city where I lived as a Park Ranger, I had to work at the desk at City Hall answering literally thousands of phone calls about the timing, duration, and status of the city’s fireworks display.

For so many of these years, I didn’t give a thought to what the date truly meant. I was alive at the Bicentennial, in 1976, but I have no reliable memories of that time - I was four years old and anything that might be a memory might also more reliably be called a memory of looking at photographs of the tall ships in one of our family albums.

It was only as I grew, and learned about people with very different experiences of this country, and this holiday, than myself, that I began to appreciate Independence Day for the flawed but important holiday that it is. What a tremendous privilege to live in a nation where my own personal rights and wellbeing were tended to so well that all this vital national moment reminded me of were certain specific celebratory foods!

While I was preparing for today’s sermon, I admit that I realized it had been many years since I read the [Declaration of Independence](#) in its entirety. It is

tempting at this moment to go through and cherry pick all the moments where I had a visceral reaction, seeing our current moment reflected through the lens of those experiencing life here in 1776. Or, to be entirely clear, the lens of those experiencing life in these colonized lands at that time who were white, land-owning men.

“Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.”

Never before had I reflected that the founders who wrote this document laid out the case for “A frog in a pot of water slowly approaching the boiling point will stay still, not jump out.”

It takes a lot to make us humans change our circumstances, even when we know, know viscerally, that those circumstances are killing us. Are killing our neighbors. Our white neighbors, our Black neighbors, our immigrant neighbors, our previously incarcerated neighbors, our unhoused neighbors, our impoverished neighbors, our queer neighbors, our transgender neighbors, our Native neighbors, our college-educated neighbors, our not-college-educated neighbors, our women neighbors, our young neighbors, our old neighbors.

I thought of sharing some words from the Unitarian Universalist Association today, one of our association’s official responses to the latest round of Supreme Court decisions... but there are too many. *Noem vs Al Otro Lado*. *West Virginia v. B.P.J.* and *Little v. Hecox*. *National Republican Senatorial Committee v. Federal Election Commission*. Even *Trump v. Barbara*, which upheld the doctrine of birthright citizenship, came closer to overturning that doctrine than most expected.

Instead, I will share some words from Frederick Douglass' historic speech, delivered on July 5, 1852, in Rochester, NY that is commonly known as ["What to the slave is your 4th of July?"](#)

"The fact that the church of our country, (with fractional exceptions,) does not esteem "the Fugitive Slave Law" as a declaration of war against religious liberty, implies that that church regards religion simply as a form of worship, an empty ceremony, and not a vital principle, requiring active benevolence, justice, love and good will towards man. It esteems sacrifice above mercy; psalm-singing above right doing; solemn meetings above practical righteousness. A worship that can be conducted by persons who refuse to give shelter to the houseless, to give bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and who enjoin obedience to a law forbidding these acts of mercy, is a curse, not a blessing to mankind."

Now the truth is that many Unitarian ministers at the time actively opposed the Fugitive Slave Act - some by taking up arms, as in the case of Theodore Parker in Boston, who would preach with a rifle in the pulpit. But as modern Unitarian Universalists have moved theologically in different and more broad directions than the Christianity within our historical founding, we can know that we have continued to work for principles and values that center active love in the world, not empty ceremony.

All the fireworks displays, cookouts, and yes even potato salad in the world mean nothing if we are not attending to the importance of the principles inherent in the founding of this democracy, AND also attending to the deep injustices and errors ALSO inherent in the founding of this democracy. [nod to racist language in the Declaration]

All the pretty words in the world mean nothing if we are not willing to look at our neighbor and say, "We, truly, are equal under the law. I will not survive without your survival. I will not thrive without your thriving."

["In every stage](#) of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress...

We're the farmer who grew the corn, who plows into his couch as worn as his back by the end of the day. We're his TV set blaring news having everything and nothing to do with the field dust in his eyes or his son nested in the ache of his arms. We're his son. We're a black teenager who drove too fast or too slow, talked too much or too little, moved too quickly, but not quick enough. We're the blast of the bullet leaving the gun. We're the guilt and the grief of the cop who wished he hadn't shot."

We are everything our neighbors are. When we recognize the privilege we have we can begin to understand the often-ugly truth of what made a way for us, and how vitally important it is that that same way be made for all, to work to repair the original harms by hewing more closely to the original ideals stripped of their racist language.

Right before we were reminded that humans will sit there suffering rather than change their circumstances, we hear "[W]hensoever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness." Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. For ALL. Not just the ones that look like us or sound like us or worship like us. It is a truly, deeply radical notion and that is why petty tyrants fear and despise true democracy.

In this time of tyranny and the open rise of oppression, this time when rights are stripped away from more and more people and wealth accumulates in the hands of fewer and fewer, when we erect algorithms between us and our neighbors, it is more vital than ever to revisit, correct, and dream anew principles for a new and vital form of government by, of, and for the people. It is time for us to witness the beauty and gifts of one another, to understand that power not in service to its people - ALL its people - must pass from this Earth, and we are the ones to usher it out. We must also be the ones to guard the delicate entry (birth?) of a new system, new structures, that they may be just and inclusive and not designed to extract from the labor of the many to enrich the few. We must bear witness.

We must be willing to change. We must be willing to give up our comfort in service to the larger good for humankind now and for generations to come.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident...

We’re the cure for hatred caused by despair. We’re the good morning of a bus driver who remembers our name, the tattooed man who gives up his seat on the subway. We’re every door held open with a smile when we look into each other’s eyes the way we behold the moon. We’re the moon. We’re the promise of one people, one breath declaring to one another: */ see you. I need you. I am you.”*

May we behold one another, fully, beautifully, imperfectly as we consider all that our new, next, world requires of us. Let us love mercy. Let us move humbly. Let us dream of a world by, of, and for all of us.

So may it be.