

First Unitarian Church

July 5, 2020

The Fourth of July always reminds me of how, when you're a little kid, your dad teaches you to evade the police.

No? Not everyone? Not even a little?

I have a vivid memory of being a little kid and sitting in the back of our car. Behind me, in the back-back of our station wagon, was a pile of illegal fireworks we had just purchased across state lines. And my dad told me that if we got pulled over by the police, I was to lie. I was to say that we were not taking those fireworks home, but to a friend's house in the state where they are legal.

Imagine my excitement. My dad was generally a law-abiding person. But the law seemed unreasonable to him. And so we conspired against the authorities.

Which, in a nutshell, is the spirit of Independence Day. Is it not? (Well, that's debatable.)

And, well, sometimes unpopular laws exist for a good reason. Later on, it was an illegal firework that launched off of the ground, over the crowd of neighbors, to the back where I had retreated, away from the pyrotechnics. It landed right about here—in the crook of my neck—and set my hair on fire. I will never forget the swarm of adults turning and descending upon me all at once to put it out. There was a kiddie pool full of slimy looking water next to me and I was sure they were going to dunk me right in it—I remember thinking that was going to be so disgusting—and then miraculously the fire was out. No pool. I got a second degree burn and a new haircut, but luckily no lasting damage.

This year, new, temporary laws restrict our celebrations in a different way- no groups, no public events. And... I do encourage us to each do our part to keep each other safe. Even if you feel like you've got things under control. The person who gets hurt may not even be in sight.

Anyway, this holiday weekend is about so much more than fireworks and parties, right?

We grow up hearing this part of the Declaration of Independence—I'll bet many of you can say it with me. 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.”

The declaration says that governments exist to secure those rights, and that whenever a government becomes destructive of them, the People have the right to change or abolish it.<sup>i</sup>

Among the intolerable grievances the colonists name in the declaration, there are these two:

“Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us” and “protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States.” In other words, armed officers killing people and not being held accountable. Hard to miss the parallels today.

And later, they also state that the crown “has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.” A little further down the page the declaration uses a dehumanizing, racist term to refer to the original inhabitants of this continent, without any apparent awareness of the self-contradiction that creates. As I read the words plunder and ravage, I thought of the Dakota Access Pipeline and the protest at Standing Rock. Again, hard to miss. There are still people in prison who were arrested at that protest—for protesting—which is a violation of their rights. And now they are at risk for COVID-19. Just this week I signed onto a letter with hundreds of clergy demanding their release.

After a public reading of the Declaration of Independence in New York on July 9, 1776, colonists pulled down a statue of King George III.<sup>ii</sup> I’m not sure how well the detail will come through on zoom. But if you can call to mind any picture of a statue being toppled recently, well, you’ve got it.

“Let America be America again,” wrote the poet Langston Hughes. Seems like America is doing that. I think one reason so many people feel surprised by it is they have only learned a limited amount of US history, and that was taught with a certain spin. The stories we tell about the past shape our understanding of the present.

Remembering and retelling other stories, the ones that reveal different perspectives, deepens and expands our understanding of our country and ourselves. So I want to retell a story about where we are today, the place we call New Mexico. Some of you will remember this story from several years ago. Like all good stories, this one is meant to be retold. Each time we hear a story, we have changed, and so, who knows, you may find yourself hearing it with “new ears.”

Of course, New Mexico was not part of the US when the Declaration of Independence was signed, sealed, and delivered. In 1776, the land we call New Mexico had been under Spanish occupation for almost 200 years, and it still was. I say “the land we call New Mexico” and not just “New Mexico” because it has also been known by other names, like “Mexico” and “New Spain,” “Apachería,” and “Comanchería.” And this land was called by other names in languages that have been here much longer than Spanish and English. Languages like Tanoan, Keresan, Zuni, and Navajo, which are still spoken here.

In 1776, this land was occupied by Spain. It became part of the US—some would say occupied by the US— later. That happened because of the Mexican American war, which I’ll be you know. But do you remember why the Mexican American war happened? This is an important part of US history, and worth repeating. The Mexican American war happened because in 1829, Mexico abolished slavery.<sup>iii</sup> Texas was part of Mexico at that time but was inhabited by white settlers who owned slaves, and they were not happy about Mexican abolition. So, Texas rebelled and became part of the US. From there, the US provoked a boundary dispute with Mexico. And by the end of the ensuing war, Mexico had lost one third of its land, including the land we are on now and including nearly all of present-day California, Utah, Nevada, and Arizona.

Last week I talked about Juneteenth and how long it took for news that slaves were free to reach Galveston, Texas. Texas had joined the US for the purpose of keeping slaves and that state was going to hold out for as long as it could.

Meanwhile, the land we call New Mexico had been a place of struggle for generations. The story I’m going to retell takes place in a certain part of this beautiful land. The part that we now call Tierra Amarilla. The name is Spanish for yellow earth, which doesn’t even begin to capture the beauty of that place. This is the land up in northern New Mexico, near Ghost Ranch, where I think many of you have probably visited. It’s the kind of landscape Georgia O’Keefe made famous in her paintings.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Spain and then Mexico had pushed into the area, driving out the native people. It was not an easy transition. The people fought for their homeland—the place of ancestors, of creation stories, of their lives. They drove the invaders out multiple times, including during the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, when pueblos across New Mexico united and purged the Spanish completely for twelve years.

And even after Spain returned, the native people maintained their claims to the land. In fact, across the US, many native communities will point out that to this day they have never signed anything giving up their claim to any land.

In the seventeen- and eighteen-hundreds, even after the land at Tierra Amarilla had been “granted” to groups of farmers and ranchers, who were themselves the subjects of colonial rule, the native people continued to fight for it, sometimes driving the settlers away again.

But eventually, the settlers won out in that area. The Tierra Amarilla land grant was “settled.” Each family would have a plot to work, with a shared area for water access and grazing.

In this way, the land grant—like other land grants in this area and up into Northern Colorado— were communal. No one owned the entire thing, but everyone had a share in it. Everyone but the native people. They had not disappeared, but had moved into other areas, and are still here.

Tierra Amarilla was lost to the settlers. And there the settlers stayed. Time passed, and the grandchildren of the people who moved onto Tierra Amarilla thought of the land as theirs. Why wouldn't they? They and their children had been born there. There was no other “home” for them. They depended on it.

Then the US-Mexican war happened, for the reasons I mentioned. When the US-Mexican treaty was signed, turning northern Mexico over to the American government, turning it into the southwestern US, the treaty promised to protect the settler families' claim to their land. The promise was that the people living on the land grants at that time could stay in place, and their heirs could inherit it just as they had. But once the transfer had been made to the American government, things changed again. Corrupt government officials seeking to make money partnered with investors who interpreted the treaty—and the law— according to their own aims. When recording who owned the land grant, they listed just one person as the owner, ignoring the complexities of common property.

Later that owner sold the property, not realizing that he would be selling it out from under his neighbors. Soon, all of the land had been taken right out from under its inhabitants. Like the native people, the land grant heirs did not go passively. They fought for their homeland, squatting there, cutting fences, and threatening the newcomers who claimed to own the land they'd had in their families for generations.

Meanwhile, the land changed hands again and again on paper, belonging to investors in New York, Boston, and even England. Many investors had no idea they were purchasing disputed land. This played out for generations, with occasional flare ups, and with many heirs simply moving into other little villages around northern New Mexico and trying to make the best of it.

This story was mostly unknown outside of the area until the 1960's, when activists in the Chicano rights movement—a part of the civil rights movement—partnered with the heirs of the Tierra Amarilla land grant and accused the US government of land theft. In his book, Properties of Violence, UNM professor David Correia describes their leader, a charismatic man named Refés Lopez Tijerina, who reignited the fight. He

threatened to seize private lands from ranchers, organized sit-ins on former land grants controlled by the US forest service—an agency he described as an occupying force in New Mexico—and attempted to make citizen’s arrests of prominent political figures, including Warren Burger, the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.<sup>iv</sup>

Thousands of heirs to the land rallied around him. He caught the attention of the federal authorities. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had him tailed everywhere he went. On June 5, 1967, their battle culminated when Tijerina led a raid on the Rio Arriba County courthouse. The raid’s goal was first, to free prisoners who had been arrested in the land grant dispute. And second, to place the district attorney under citizen’s arrest. It did not go well.<sup>v</sup>

Neither the prisoners nor the district attorney were there. But a gunfight broke out. At the end of the raid, two officials had been shot and two people had been kidnapped. The raiders fled into the mountains, where police helicopters buzzed overhead and National Guard tanks crashed through rural dirt roads in search of the rebels. Can you imagine this? National Guard tanks crashing through rural roads in New Mexico?

Suddenly, Tijerina was famous. Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad invited him to speak, and so did the Poor People’s Campaign, who asked him to stand in, along with Ralph Abernathy and Jesse Jackson, for Martin Luther King Jr, after King was killed.

Tijerina also was arrested and eventually incarcerated. On Thursday, I had the opportunity to speak with someone who met Reies Lopez Tijerina back in the 1970’s, after he got out of prison. It was a lawyer who had also worked on a dispute over a land grant, but he had done so in southern Colorado, a few years after the Tierra Amarilla dispute. He told me that, thanks in part to Tijerina inspiring people to take a stand, the case in southern Colorado was *successful*. The land was actually restored to communal ownership by the families that had been there for generations, since before the US Mexican border “crossed them” when that treaty was signed. Ever since it had been taken from the native people.

The history of colonization, racism, theft, and violence in the United States does make a complicated present. But if we are afraid to take an honest look at it, if we avoid the truth, who does that serve? Who maintains a lot of privilege based on past wrongs? And who continues to be relegated to the margins of society? With poverty compounding on poverty. They have “plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people,” says the Declaration of Independence. It doesn’t have to keep being this way. We don’t have to keep pretending there’s nothing we can do about it. When the government becomes destructive of the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, when it treats some people as *less than* others, then it is the right of the people to change it. For these reasons, and so many more, I deeply believe that the US needs to establish a truth commission to examine the impact of racism and racist policies and laws from our country’s founding until today.

And why am I telling this story in a church? Is this a sermon or a history lesson? It's a sermon. Because, it matters not just what the facts are, it also matters what we believe. The Spanish, and then the English, occupied and ravaged this land believing that it was what God wanted them to do. The Spanish believed that the earth belonged to God, and the Catholic church was God's representative on earth, and so the earth belonged to the church. American colonists believed it was their religious duty and destiny to take over North America. And all across the country this morning, on this fourth of July weekend, I guarantee you there are preachers who are still saying something to that effect.

In truth, Unitarians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century participated in efforts to convert native Americans to Christianity- something for which our denomination has repented and apologized. Today our denomination is an active partner in the fight for indigenous rights, and in the work of dismantling racism. That means we tell the other stories. It means we teach and preach and live the truth that all means all. That when the ancient creation story says humans are made in the image of the divine, it means all humans. That "all men are created equal," means all humans. And that our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, means everyone.

This morning's story is a story of land, displacement, and greed, of remembering and forgetting. And it's a story about borders—the ones that we draw and redraw on maps, and the ones that we draw around history, limiting what we will acknowledge of it. Those borders divide whole groups of people from each other, and create seemingly separate Americas. And so I'll close by reminding us of words by the writer and poet Gina Valdés. First in Spanish, then in English. Valdes writes:

"Hay tantísimas fronteras que dividen a la gente. Pero por cada frontera, existe también un puente."

There are so many borders that divide people. But for every border, there is also a bridge.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration/what-does-it-say>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://library.brown.edu/create/modernlatinamerica/chapters/chapter-14-the-united-states-and-latin-america/primary-documents-w-accompanying-discussion-questions/abraham-lincoln-on-the-mexican-american-war-1846-48/>

<sup>iv</sup> From Kindle version- no page number available.

<sup>v</sup> This story is told in Correia's book, as well as in Tijerina's obituary in the LA Times:

<https://www.latimes.com/local/obituaries/la-me-reies-lopez-tijerina-20150123-story.html>