

THE MORAL FABRIC OF THE HOLIDAYS
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As a minister, you get an angle on the holidays that I suspect few get.

I had not expected the ministry to train me in the nuances of each season and, more deeply, the real lessons and truths that I think each holiday brings, but it happened.

So today, rather than projecting out our resolutions, I wanted to see if speaking about the lessons the holidays we encounter each year bring, and pausing on them for a moment, we might exact even more transformation than a list of resolutions might bring.

For obvious reasons I will begin with New Year's Day and close with Christmas.

New Year's Day is obviously about new beginnings, and fresh starts. It is the season of resolutions to be better people. To me, though the real gift of New Year's Day is a moment to drop our skepticism, and all the details that get in the way of who we want to be, and to dream ourselves forward a bit.

And for many of us the week between Christmas and the New Year is a little bit of a hole in time. At best it really is a chance to dream ourselves anew in a way.

New Year's Day is to some a time of reflecting back, and certainly it can be, but it is more about forward. To me there is a cool delusion offered by each new year, it is the opportunity to reinvent ourselves blind to the aches and pains, the just one more bites of brownies that sneak up on our waistlines.

In the case of New Year's Day, I offer up a moment to dream up one simple image of a new you, unmuddled by other truths. What new thing do you want to try, or perhaps more importantly, what new way do you want to be you in next year.

Martin Luther King Day is the next real holiday that follows our annual opportunity for personal renewal. MLK Day is of course about a noble and courageous man who in his own era fought for equal rights and the dignity of African Americans. However, as his career moved towards its harsh end, he began speaking about working and poor people everywhere. MLK day is the reminder that all humans are oddly both equal, and not equal, yet. Martin Luther King day is one of the few holidays that, rather than asking us to identify ourselves with a particular faith or nation, testifies that we actually live today in diverse, plural times, and that from that diversity, there is no turning back. A real look at this holiday reminds us that this was not always true. Not too, too long ago most of us lived couched in our particular groups. MLK day also testifies that people still do heroic things, and that there are heroic and historical things yet to be done.

I invite you now to pause on what you are doing, to imagine us here doing our little church part to build up a world that cooperates, and to ask yourself what heroic thing lies inside of you. What are you doing to foster a world that cooperates? What heroic thing lies inside of you?

Valentine's Day testifies to the power and importance of romantic love in our lives. Sadly, and just as quickly, Valentine's Day can point out either or both what we do not have, and/or what we have lost. Be that as it is, I invite you to put that aside for a minute, and to bring up its best. I am asking you on our moral speed date through the new year to remember that Valentine's day does not ask of you any sacrifice, or noble task. Valentine's Day simply gives us pause to notice that in life is the potential for romantic love, and that is a beautiful and hopeful thing.

I offer you on this early Sunday in the new year a moment to think about who you would either really love to kiss or remember kissing. No Sharing allowed.

Presidents Day draws us out of the dreamy revelry of Cupid, and back to thoughts of a connection to your place, and your people. Washington and Lincoln, the Presidents who share a birthday here in mid-February, speak to heroism and to the part of you that identifies with our country. Presidents Day like Independence Day, —but I think even better—invites us to contemplate what it is to be an American. In thinking about Presidents Day I invite you to reflect that although our country is far from perfect, we are driven by a powerful and great dream.

I invite you to indulge in the idea that you are living in, are likely a citizen of one of humanity's most important historical experiments. America is arguably the greatest dream any country ever had about itself. What does that mean to you? What does that demand of you?

In and around Presidents Day, we are also obviously in the northern hemisphere in the middle of our coldest period. This time of year is a time when Winter's natural stillness and cold offers us a chance to turn inward, to quiet ourselves. It is a deep and old instinct to be reflective at this time of year. Christian or not, Lent and Winter team up to teach us that some of the best, most important things in life come with no confetti or fanfare, and are not exactly fun. *Some of the best of life is its opportunity for quiet, deep, stillness and what flows from that.*

I invite you to ask yourself if you are creating enough time for just you and you—you and God, if you will. Call it what you like, getting to Lent should smell crisp and clean and create a quiet alertness. Take a deep breath in and a deep breath out.

Hey, Socrates, wake up! Don't get too attached to the quiet because the stillness of Lent and Winter are ironically, almost comically, bookended by the party holidays of Mardi Gras and St. Patrick's Day. These two holidays, in practice, offer up a different emotional message than internal reflection and purity. Mardi Gras and St. Patrick's Day almost comically bookend the quiet of Lent by beckoning us to the power, spirituality, and necessity of letting your hair down, and celebrating. These two holidays ask us to turn outwards. These two holidays testify that part of life is about fun. Part of life is about meditation and prayer, *and another part is about partying.*

So, if you are good at being quiet, and reflective, Mardi Gras and St Patrick's Day ask us to remember that some of the most important things in life are outside yourself?

Are you taking yourself too seriously? Are you having enough fun? Good question. Write enough MLK day and Earth Day sermons and you realize that Earth Day, like Martin Luther King Jr.'s holiday, is an attempt to provide a wake-up call for the collective us that we need to establish some new, new important relationships for this modern world of ours.

Earth Day is for me at its best a cold wake-up call that we as a species need to cultivate a much different relationship with our planet than we have today. That presently our relationship is a dysfunctional one, and more warmly Earth Day should be a reminder that we are blessed, lucky, miraculously on this beautiful planet, perfectly situated from the Sun. And that our healthy relationship with it is not guaranteed.

And that is sweet, but mostly I want Earth Day to feel like a slap, so I invite you to give yourself one of those scolding slaps on the back of your hand. The pause of Earth Day is simple.

Are you acting as part of the solution to the present environmental problem—because you certainly are or part of the problem.

Right around this time is of course formally the message that death is not the end of the story. Jesus offers the promise that you will go on! To me though, *looked at more broadly, Easter is a wink that you don't know everything; that there is always more mystery.* It is not coincidental that Easter, like Passover, and the Pagan Holiday of Beltane, are all set in Spring when life, like bunnies and new growth, feels irrepressible.

I am drawing up Easter to ask you to remember that new green shoots are not too far away and to ask yourself what in your life needs new life.

As we move from the freshness of Spring to Summer's trustworthy heat, we run into Memorial Day. Memorial Day is perhaps the most perfectly and uniquely misplaced request that we pause in our Spring to Summer revelry to think reflectively. Memorial Day is obviously a time to all together remember those who have given their lives in war, and as it has become the custom, a pause to remember all of those personally who have passed. I love Memorial Day for being a bar-b-que buzz-kill. Good for it.

So, who as we start this New Year, who have "the fates" not "allowed" you to be with. We stop to think about the known and the unknown people who died fighting for our freedom to do this. Have you stopped in your life to pay respect to the known and the unknown people who died fighting for your freedom and safety?

The pause to remember those who have died, and those who gave their lives for others, is surrounded by a pause to remember those who shape us. Mother's Day and Father's Day obviously express the importance the people who fill these roles play in our lives. No other roles demand such a pause. Because no other roles are as important.

It is a rare person that does not connect holiday memories of all kinds to our parents. So, as we start the year, we are all given pause to think about our parents, with us or not, good or ill. Take a moment to think about your parents. Are you doing enough for them if they are alive? Are you acting as their legacy, and carrying on their memory in a way that is appropriate to your standard here on earth? Only you know.

On July 4th we celebrate our unlikely victory over the Brits almost two hundred fifty years ago, and the "Birth of our nation." This holiday is the official reminder of summers good weather, perhaps even the power of a fighting for and fulfilling a dream. The Fourth of July should remind us that we were underdogs once. We are no longer the underdog. Pass me a firecracker. Hand me a beer. I want to celebrate that I no longer need to pretend we like hot tea more than coffee.

Pause for a minute of pride and remember two things, one that, had our ancestors on the East Coast not made such an indignant and courageous stink about taxes and freedom, we might still be forced to watch cricket. And two, the average person in the world had no rights until those early Americans took that simple dream, fought for it, and won.

We were an upstart band of revolutionaries, and now we fly unmanned drones over now poor revolutionaries. We are liberators of nations and conquerors, we are the powerful, the privileged and the responsible. What are you doing with that? Do you spend time thinking about that privilege?

The rest of the Summer should be fun enough to not need a holiday, and appropriately enough, it doesn't have one. There is nothing to be learned from July 4th to Labor Day, except maybe to how to swim.

The Middle East may be the cradle of civilization, but never forget America is the petri dish of broadly established citizen's rights. Pinch yourself that you are here and very likely one of them. Take a moment and be grateful that you are safely entrenched in the empire of our time on Earth. Now, decide what you feel called to, in order to preserve our nations high calling.

Labor Day on that first long weekend in September is really the last breath of Summer. Labor Day, not unlike Mother's Day, or Father's Day, forces us to pause and take some notice that working people generally contribute more to our society than they get in return. It is that simple, Labor Day is built to acknowledge and give a little break to those workers, most of us, to take some notice that working people contribute more than they get in return.

I invite you to pause and ask what it means to live in a capitalist country that holds up that people who labor for a living have a holiday acknowledging the fights for their rights. Have we forgotten that the fight for working people is being lost?

Kids are back to school, Church has started back, Rosh Hosanna and Yom Kippur—the Jewish New Year and Day of Forgiveness and Atonement—are right there to remind us that our calendar is not the only one. Like the way Lent mixes in with Mardi Gras, Yom Kippur, the Jewish holy day of getting right with your neighbors and thus God, dances right next to Rosh Hosanna, the celebration of the Jewish New Year.

At Mardi Gras you party because you're about to fast and pray, and at Yom Kippur you seek forgiveness because you want a clean slate for the new year. These holidays ask you what hard thing you need to do or say to have a clean slate.

As we bid farewell to Summer and enter Fall we enter the complicated neighboring national holidays of Columbus Day/Indigenous Peoples' Day, and Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is the celebration of our nation's first dinner. A time to remember what we are grateful for, a collective time to remember the courage of the explorers and settlers. These days, both of celebration and mourning, mark the discovery of our Continent by Europeans, which given that we still call it the Discovery of our Continent speaks of how Eurocentric we remain.

It is a good time to ask where your pride and appreciation for your heritage meets your openness to being challenged by new ways of thinking.

Veterans Day is a tribute to the sacrifice our American soldiers have made for us and those they have never met. Like we asked before on Memorial Day and Labor Day, are you taking for granted the sacrifice and labor of others in the things you rely on?

The Solstice and really all the pagan holidays demand we look at our obvious connection to the seasons. They like, Earth Day, are a reminder of what is primary, and what is primary is that biology rules. I always think that the pagan holidays invite us to remember that our history is longer than our memory and history records. The reclaimed pagan traditions remind us that spirituality extends beyond the world religious traditions that *civilization birthed*. And the pagan traditions teach us that that the best way to be human is to feel our interdependence.

Are you respectful of the interdependent web upon which are lives rest? Let's pause for a moment to remember that.

And Christmas is of course...about... well, you should have been here Christmas Eve. Lots of things come with Christmas, and if you have forgotten what Christmas is all about, well, I can't help you.

That was our moral tour.

Amen