



QUESTIONING THE COUNTRY WITH FREDERICK DOUGLASS: JUDGMENT, NOT JOY ON JULY 4TH

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If WE ARE TO HONOR AND RIGHTFULLY appreciate our history and struggle to liberate ourselves and expand the realm of freedom and justice in this country, we must stand with Frederick Douglass at Rochester, New York in 1852, at every Fourth of July celebration. To stand with Douglass on this day is not only to read, discuss and study his July 4th speech, but to join him then and now and afterward in questioning and critical judgment of society. Indeed, this calls for questioning and rejecting celebration of a myth of an inclusive freedom that doesn't exist, a society still deformed and ruined by racism and the practice of an infantile, mindless and immoral patriotism which requires forgetting one's own oppression and that of others to be a part of this madness.

The practice of courageous questioning, which Douglass models and mirrors for us, is a moral imperative and social good deeply embedded in the history and culture of our people. Indeed, the moral imperative of courageous questioning is both a mental and practical activity. It is not only to challenge claims by raising questions, but also by struggling against evil, injustice, untruth and oppression. For the most severe criticism of any society is active resistance against it. And Douglass calls for and practices both. And such questioning is also expressed in the revolts of the enslaved Africans, the revolts of the 60s, the revolt in Ferguson and the forest fire of revolts it inspired. Likewise, it is now expressed in the struggles being waged continuing and expanding the historical struggles against police violence and systemic racism.

Douglass speaks especially to and questions the hypocrisy of a racist and enslaving society and its systemic violence of domination, deprivation and degradation which he calls alternately moral and social savagery and barbarism. After he assures his predominantly White audience that they have reason to celebrate the Fourth, since it celebrates them, he begins to call into question their presumption that he should sing its praises also. Indeed, he begins with a series of four inter-

related questions to highlight and expose the arrogant presumption and hypocrisy, not only of inviting him to praise them, but also of making claims to freedom and justice that do not include him or his enslaved people. He asks "Why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national Independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and actual justice embodied in the Declaration of Independence extended to us? And am I therefore called upon to bring our humble offerings to the national altar and to confess devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us?" He wishes out loud that he could answer affirmatively saying, "Would to God, both for your sakes and ours, that an *affirmative answer could be truthfully returned* to these questions. But such is not the case." (my emphasis)

One of the central points Douglass makes in the above statement and in continuing stress in his classic speech is that we cannot in good faith pretend that White Americans, their history and ours, are one of equals in terms of the benefits of freedom and justice. And thus, his first lesson is that we must set aside illusions about our status in America and as the ancient Husitic scriptures say, "bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place," especially among those who have no voice, the devalued, degraded and oppressed.

Secondly, by the four introductory questions, Douglass means to make a clear distinction between the history and holiday of the oppressed and the oppressor, the enslaved and the enslaver. He feels, he says a "sad sense of disparity between him and his people and the whites," saying the heritage and blessings of "justice, liberty, prosperity and independence bequeathed (to you) by your fathers, is shared not by me." Therefore, he rightly concludes, "This Fourth of July is yours not mine." Again, Douglass wants us to stay away from self-deception of freedom and justice already achieved. For it easily saps the

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will, reason and readiness to struggle to secure these natural rights.

Douglass here, like Min. Malcolm, is no flag waver or pathetic marginalized and oppressed patriot pretending equality. Without using Malcolm's words, he demonstrates that far from being a beneficiary of an inclusive democracy, he is a victim of a racist herrenvolk or master race democracy. Indeed, Douglass speaks to the violence in its various barbaric forms imposed on the enslaved Africans. He concludes saying of that time, "lay your facts by the side of everyday practice of this nation and you will say with me that for revolting barbarity, and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival." This country's history of savage violence against Black people, not only during the Holocaust of enslavement, but also during segregation, continues in the systemic and police violence against Black people today.

Already, Douglass in his speech had called into question White America's ruthless and conscience-less pursuit of wealth, its vulgar quest for respect and reputation without its actual requirements. Thus, he says, "It is a fact" which White Americans attest to "that whatever makes for wealth or for the reputation of America and can be had cheap: will be found among Americans." Therefore, seeking and enslaving cheap labor and cheaper life of others different in the service of the White and wealthy is part of the self-understanding of a racist, enslaving, wealth-pursuing society. And Douglass asks us to question and resist this and to value life and to denounce the violation and destruction of life, the enslavement and torture, whippings, amputations and other savageries imposed on Black people.

Douglass also criticizes and calls on the church to stop its alliance with enslavement, its endorsement of death and dismemberment, and to

honor its best principles by joining the abolitionist initiatives. He condemned hypocritical and complicit worship and worship as "an empty ceremony and not a vital principle requiring active benevolence, justice, love and good will toward man (human beings)." Indeed, he says, "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 acts of mercy is a curse not a blessing to (humankind.)"

In conclusion, Frederick Douglass rejected illusions, made necessary distinctions, questioned America's hypocrisy and barbarism, its acute denial and refused to argue our humanity and focused on self-evident natural rights that accompany this status. And above all, Douglass, in the Black struggle tradition by which he is known, argued for righteous and relentless struggle to achieve real freedom and justice in this country.

LIKE THOSE OF US WHO HAVE STRUGGLED and continue to struggle for the good, the right and the possible, he taught the indispensability of struggle. And he taught that we must not be complicit in our silence or inaction. Nor must we be responsible in the eyes of the oppressor, but rather be outrageous toward them and responsible in the eyes of the people. He thus tells us in our struggle, "it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need storm, the whirlwind and the earthquake." For not only must we raise the level of the country's moral awareness and sense of right, but "also, the propriety of the nation must be startled, the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed and the crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced." And they must be ended and new way and world opened for African and human freedom, justice and flourishing. ▲

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