

Proper 9C-1
Morning Prayer
American Independence Day Weekend
2 Kings 5:1-14
Psalm 30
Galatians 6:1-16

During the past month — and the last week in particular — the ways in which we seek to control and assign value to bodies: trans bodies, pregnant bodies, brown and black bodies, children’s bodies have been placed before us in gut-wrenching, heart-breaking, soul-deep weeping ways. There is no turning away from seeing the brokenness of systems, structures, and policies that give more rights to guns than pregnant persons and that devalue the lives of migrants, contributing to the death of 53 people in a tractor-trailer in Texas.

This de-humanization is not new. Driven by money and power, it has been an integral part of American culture since this country’s founding.

For Christians who strive to live according to Jesus’ Way, the Way of Love, this realization can feel overwhelming. How are we possibly to untangle the good of the US Constitution from the bad — or, at the very least, the blindspots of its writers?

Something which I so appreciate about our call as Jesus-following Christians, which is so easily overlooked in the multivalent, multilayered reality of modern society, is that our call is actually remarkably simple.

We are simply called to return again and again to the simple practice of love.

Now, simple and easy are, of course, very different things.

The world we live in, the landscape in front of us as a big-C and small-c church, and this season in the life of this nation, are so layered with complexity that we can easily feel overwhelmed and even paralyzed by it. The thing to remember is we are not called to address the whole thing at one time. Simply, we are called to do the next right thing, working in the interest of the greater good whenever we have the opportunity.

Someone who I believe had a deep understanding of this and whose life reflected this way of living is The Rev. Dr. Ann Pauli Murray, a saint of the Church as of 2021, whose feast day is celebrated on July 1.

Murray wrote,

I want to see America be who she says she is
in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

America, be who you proclaim yourself to be!¹

¹ as quoted in *My Name is Pauli Murray*. Directed by Betsy West and Julie Cohen. Amazon Studios: Culver City, CA (2021).

On July 1, the Episcopal Church celebrates the feast of Pauli Murray, legal crusader and theorist; activist; educator; first ordained black female Episcopal Priest; and co-founder of the National Organization for Women.

Born in Baltimore in 1910, Murray was raised by her Aunt Pauline and Fitzgerald family grandparents in Durham, North Carolina; a time when it was not uncommon for 50-60 African Americans to be lynched each year. Murray recounts that “the awareness of the Klu Klux Klan was always in the background; [an awareness that to a child of Murray’s generation] rose with you just like almost a part of your body, and your being.” she explained.²

And yet, even within that context, Murray claimed the freedom to be whomever Pauli understood herself to be. For much of Murray’s early life, they both celebrated and wrestled with an awareness that the world saw them as female and that they were drawn towards a stereotypically masculine presentation and were attracted to women. Murray’s experiences with race and gender fueled their commitment to justice advocacy work.

Elizabeth Alexander writes, in the Introduction to *Dark Testament and Other Poems*, a collection of Murray’s poetry, “Murray's experience of gender was not fixed by social norms. And her admission and embrace of her gender fluidity was highly unusual in her times. How Murray lived in

² My Name is Pauli Murray.

gender surfaces the deepest human questions: Who am I? What do I desire? How am I oriented? Where is my sun, my north star?”³

All questions with which I have been encouraged to ponder in the practice of my Episcopal Christian faith. The more adept we become in sitting with these questions and the clearer we are about our answers the more certain we can be about where and how God is calling us to act in the world.

“Incident after incident would pile up,” Murray remarked, “and I would either go berserk or figure out a way to protest.”⁴ And protest she did!

Fifteen years before Rosa Parks launched the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Murray sued to end bus segregation in Richmond, Virginia.

In 1944, more than a decade before *Brown v. Board of Education*, Murray argued for applying the 14th Amendment’s equal protection clause to challenge “separate but equal” laws in their Howard University Law School senior paper, titled, “Should *Plessey v. Ferguson* Be Overruled?”

By 1951 Murray’s research in this area gave rise to a book, *States’ Laws on Race and Color*, which proved itself foundational to Thurgood Marshall’s work on the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision of 1954.

³ Pauli Murray. *Dark Testament and other Poems*. Liveright: New York, NY (2018).

⁴ *My Name is Pauli Murray*.

As the civil rights movement established its footing in the 1960s, Murray was already several steps ahead, arguing that the 14th Amendment's equal protection clause was as relevant to cases of sexual discrimination as [to] instances of racial discrimination.

Murray served on the 1961 Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, and in 1966, she was a co-founding member of NOW, the National Organization for Women.

Murray's 14th amendment argument proved so robust that it became the foundation for Ruth Bader Ginsburg's 1971 argument in *Reed v. Reed*, in which the Supreme Court ruled the 14th Amendment prohibited sex discrimination. (Ginsburg naming Murray as a co-author in the decision.)

And as recently as 2020, the American Civil Liberties Union built on Murray's work, centering it to successfully argue before the Supreme Court that laws against sex discrimination also protect LGBTQIA+ people.⁵

Undeniably, Murray seemed to have found her calling. ACLU Attorney, Chase Strangio points out, "It is always the people who are experiencing the most forms of discrimination who have the most insight into how to build the solutions. Pauli was that person."

Murray taught generations of legal practitioners and scholars, serving in faculty or administrative positions at the Ghana School of Law, Benedict

⁵ Terrance Heath. "My Name Is Pauli Murray: A Life Between Blurred Lines", *Conscience Magazine*. November 4, 2021. Published online: <https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/resource-library/my-name-is-pauli-murray-a-life-between-blurred-lines/>. Last accessed July 2, 2022.

College, and Brandeis University, before choosing to answer a call to ordained ministry.

In 1973 Murray began her studies at General Theological Seminary. She was ordained deacon in June 1976, and, on January 8, 1977, she was ordained priest at Washington National Cathedral. She served at Church of the Atonement in Washington, D.C., from 1979 to 1981 and at Holy Nativity Church in Baltimore until her death in 1985.

I have no doubt that Murray continued her teaching and formation of scholars and practitioners in the fields of race and gender equality throughout her priesthood and, I will happily argue, even after.

It has becoming clear that the history of the United States of America cannot be taught without teaching the legacy of Pauli Murray: Civil rights, feminism, religion, literature, law, sexuality – no matter the subject, there is Pauli Murray.

In her priesthood and in her poetry, Murray offers a vision of the healing of the world that looks upon the wounds of history with honest and open eyes, that laments that which is broken in human beings together, and that yet sings God's grace and hope for new creation, a new humanity.

We can only live one day at a time. One moment at a time. We are asked only to love the person in front of us, to offer our best to each challenge we meet, and to continue to bring all of it back to God's mercy, power, and grace.

It is not ours to take away the pain that so many feel when they face the weight of cruelty and injustice. But we can always do the next small, right thing. And when we have the opportunity, to ensure that that next right thing is work for the good of all.

While our souls may be weary, let us pray that we never grow weary of doing what is right and that whenever, wherever, and however we can, may we keep working — step by step — for the greater good, the loving good of all.

Amen.

The Rev. Lauren Sayre Lukason

July 3, 2022

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA (with Recording)