

The Stuff We Carry
Sermon preached June 21, 2026
Father's Day, Pride weekend, and Juneteenth
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
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It's a complicated weekend: Father's Day, and Pride weekend in Pittsfield, and our national and local celebration of Juneteenth. But here we are. Thankfully, we are never alone in our pondering, we are surrounded by a cloud of wise witnesses to help guide us.

Margaret Atwood writes: "Oppression involves a failure of the imagination: the failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings."¹

Her wisdom speaks to the core of our need to celebrate Pride and Juneteenth - to acknowledge our societal failure to imagine the full humanity of other human beings. And as a people of faith, to declare God's truth - that we are all gloriously and wondrously made in God's image.

I think it helps to begin by acknowledging that, as humans, we each carry a lot of preconceived ideas and prejudices. And a lot of what we carry isn't intentional, we learned it at a very early age. From the people who raised us, and the communities which shaped us. Often the stuff we learn isn't meant to be malicious. These attitudes and understandings were passed down through stories at the dinner table, warnings offered in the car ride home, jokes told at family gatherings, the subjects everyone avoided, the people who were welcomed into the house, and the people who never crossed the threshold. Before we ever learned to think for ourselves, we learned how to see.²

As we grow up, things happen which should help us shift our perspective, and cause us to reconsider all the baggage piled upon us. We develop friendships with people we were taught to fear. We realize all that was omitted from our history textbooks. We experience a faith that is loving and empowers us to leave an abusive church. We begin to see through fresh eyes, we put down what we didn't even realize we were carrying. We learn to lean into the truth.

Which brings us to our difficult Gospel text, in which Jesus says one of the strangest things in all the Gospels: "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

The Rev. Dr. Andrew Thayer comments:

It is a shocking sentence coming from the lips of the man who blesses peacemakers and commands us to love our enemies. The early Christians were troubled by it as well. John Chrysostom—a fourth-century bishop of Constantinople ... — insisted that Jesus was not condemning family affection; he was reminding us that no earthly loyalty is ultimate. [Chrysostom] noticed that the sword appears immediately after Jesus tells his disciples to proclaim openly what had been whispered in secret. The conflict comes not

because Christians enjoy division, but because truth has a way of disrupting arrangements built upon silence, injustice, prejudice.

Chrysostom went further still: not all peace is good peace. Robbers can have peace. Oppressors can have peace. Families can have peace so long as nobody names the lie.

The peace Jesus disturbs is the peace that asks us to sacrifice truth for belonging. The peace that says, "Don't embarrass the family."
The peace that says, "This is just how things are."

Jesus is not saying that family is bad. He is saying that family is not God. Family is where we first learn how to love. It is also where we first learn whom to fear or exclude or ignore.

...

The Gospel does not ask us to stop loving the people who formed us. It asks us to love the truth more than the stories that taught us whom to fear.³

Beloved Ones, the call of the Gospel is to examine what we carry - the fears we inherited, the prejudices we absorbed, and the loyalties we support - which were handed to us long before we had language to question them. To commit ourselves to setting all of that down, and to champion God's truth. The truth of everyone's beloved-ness by virtue of their creation. And to love that truth first and foremost.

Which naturally brings us to our celebration of Pride. Another friend of mine, the Rev. Cameron Partridge, a trans man, was the preacher at last year's Episcopal Church-wide Pride Eucharist, and he shared a wise and powerful sermon.

In it he writes:

Let us love one another, not even though or despite our queerness, our transness but because of the unique human beings God has created us to be and to become. In the face of so many who refuse to know us, may our love, our lives reflect the glory of God upholding us, transforming us, strengthening us, and charging us to make our way forward in this moment, together.⁴

During his sermon, Partridge told a story about being a college student, and interviewing an openly gay priest for an essay on the conflict of sexuality in The Episcopal Church in the 90s. Partridge asked the priest, "Do you see [being gay] as integral to your ministry or do you see it as somewhat a part of you that isn't necessarily in the forefront?"

The priest replied, "People say to you, 'oh, I love you even though you are gay.' And my answer is, 'on the contrary, you love me because I am gay. The things that you love about me – my warmth, my empathy, my identification with the marginalized, my passion for justice, my humor

– all of those things have been shaped by the experience of being gay. So if you love me, not only is being gay part of the package. In a very, very real spiritual sense, gay is the package.⁵

Friends, we've circled back to where we started - considering the baggage we carry, our prejudice, our fears, our family's secrets, the perspective that was unintentionally shaped. And our need to set that down, as we focus on God's truth.

Which brings us to our celebration of Juneteenth. In her letter to all the faithful in our diocese of Western Massachusetts, our Bishop, Miguelina Howell, writes about Juneteenth:

Today invites us to give thanks, celebrate resilience, and honor the enduring hope and strength of Black communities. It is also a day that invites us to tell the truth.

One of the enduring wounds of racism and white supremacy is not only oppression itself, but the systematic erasure of memory. Entire generations of Black women and men have contributed to the building of this nation, the advancement of science and medicine, the flourishing of the arts, the strengthening of communities, and the life of the Church, only to have their stories diminished, forgotten, or omitted from the narratives we tell about ourselves.

The practice of erasure is powerful because it operates quietly. It removes names from history books. It overlooks achievements, tells incomplete stories and leaves future generations without mirrors in which to see themselves and without a truthful account of the past.

The opposite of remembering is not merely forgetting. It is losing sight of the truth.

Juneteenth reminds us that freedom requires more than legal proclamation. Freedom requires truth-telling. It requires remembering those whose voices have been silenced and honoring those whose contributions have been overlooked and to confront the ways in which historical narratives have too often privileged some stories while neglecting others.

This work is not about guilt. It is about honesty. It is not about rewriting history. It is about telling it more fully. And it is not only about the past. The stories we choose to tell today shape the world we are creating for tomorrow. As followers of Jesus, we are called to be people of truth. We worship a God who sees those whom the world overlooks, who calls by name those whom society forgets, and who continually widens the circle of belonging.

On this Juneteenth, may we celebrate freedom. May we honor the resilience and excellence of Black communities. May we tell the stories that have too often been left untold or have been “reframed”.

Let's recommit ourselves to the sacred work of remembering, believing that when the truth is spoken in love, healing becomes possible and God's dream for humanity comes more clearly into view.⁶

Beloved-made-in-God's-image-ones, this weekend, may we lean into God's truth. Set down the baggage we carry, and pick up what really matters - the truth of our common humanity and the value of our diversity. The gifts we are given through one another's uniqueness, the ways all are made in the image of God, and the beauty of that creation.

This weekend as we honor the beloved-ness of our siblings - we acknowledge the damage done to them, and our role in the on-going oppression they contend with day in and day out. May we commit ourselves to keeping each other's resounding dignity at the forefront of our hearts and minds, as we continue to fight the injustice that oppresses any of God's beloved children. Amen.

¹ As quoted in Sojourners' Verse of the Day, March 30, 2026

² The Rev. Dr. Andrew Thayer, *The People Who Taught Us to Love Also Taught Us Whom to Fear*; Lectionary reflection - What Jesus Meant When He Said He Came to Bring a Sword - Matthew 10:24-39, Andrew Thayer Studio, posted June 16, 2026

³ The Rev. Dr. Andrew Thayer, *The People Who Taught Us to Love Also Taught Us Whom to Fear*; Lectionary reflection - What Jesus Meant When He Said He Came to Bring a Sword - Matthew 10:24-39, Andrew Thayer Studio, posted June 16, 2026

⁴ Shireen Korkzan, Episcopal Church blesses, commissions Pride Month celebrations, Episcopal News Service, posted Jun 2, 2026

⁵ Shireen Korkzan, Episcopal Church blesses, commissions Pride Month celebrations, Episcopal News Service, posted Jun 2, 2026

⁶ The Rt. Rev. Miguelina Howell, Juneteenth; The Sacred Work of Remembering Bishop's note on Juneteenth, sent to Diocese of Western Massachusetts, June 19, 2026