

Stumbling Toward Perfect
Sermon preached July 5, 2026
[Propers for Independence Day](#)
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
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I was reluctant to transfer the celebration of Independence Day to today. Because there are so many claiming Christian values who have far too much to say about God and country - virtually all of which I find offensive and contrary to the teachings of Jesus. But **not** engaging this conversation allows these other voices to hijack it completely, and to claim values on our behalf. So here we go. This year, in addition to Independence Day, we're celebrating the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, and the birth of this country.

I remember the bicentennial celebration in 1976. We lived in Kansas, on the military base at Fort Leavenworth, where my dad attended Command and General Staff College. Living on a military base - living embodiments of "provide for the common defense."¹

Following that summer's national celebration our family left for Germany, where we were stationed for three years. Living in Germany before the fall of the Berlin wall taught me to ask critical questions. **Convicting** questions for the general population of Germany, most of whom claimed to be ignorant of what they had perpetrated, both actively and through their complicity. I was shocked that my German friends' textbooks skipped over the specifics of the Holocaust.

And I brought that critical lens home - to engage our American history textbooks and ask a lot of convicting questions of our own history. To learn that the American patriots I'd been taught to admire were deeply flawed.

In the Declaration of Independence, our founding fathers professed:

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.²

But that's not really what they meant. Not "all men" were included in that declaration, and women weren't even a consideration. Equality was limited to white, property-owning men. Being endowed with life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness was dependent upon wealth, skin color, and gender. That's still true. And the land our founders were trying to wrest from the crown wasn't free for the taking. It was stripped from indigenous people.

Which is why our celebration of this nation is complicated - should **always** be complicated. Particularly at this moment, when the nation seems more divided than united, and our leadership embodies ideals which are more grotesque than glorious.

Our theologian friend, The Rev. Dr. Andrew Thayer, articulates the complexity of our nation's history.³ He writes:

Every nation lives by symbol, myth and inheritance, and almost every nation leans toward the version of the past that makes its people feel chosen rather than implicated. America's preferred story has long been one of promise, courage, invention, and freedom. There is truth in that story, and it would be [a] kind of falsehood to deny it. But another story runs beside it: slavery, trail of tears, broken treaties, racial internment, and democratic promises withheld from those whose lives would have exposed the lie of equality too clearly.

Dr. Thayer continues:

The danger is that memory can become evasive in opposite directions. Patriotic mythmaking smooths the past until the victims become incidental to the story. Historical despair, for all its moral seriousness, can flatten the past in a different way, treating every ideal and every promise as fraud. One interpretation shields us from shame while the other shields us from disappointment. Neither is finally adequate to the burden of history, because both are selective. Myth forgets the victims. Despair forgets that the future has any claim on us.

I mentioned my experience as a young person living in Germany in the late 1970's. Since then, the Berlin wall has come down, and a reunited Germany has modeled some of the healthiest accountable remembering. One of the most remarkable memorial efforts is that of the *Stolpersteine*, or "stumbling stones:" these are 10 x10 inch brass plaques embedded in the pavement marking the last freely chosen residences of Holocaust victims. Each handcrafted stone bears an individual's name, birth year, and their fate; requiring you to bend down to read it, which symbolizes paying respect to the victim.

In 2022, the Atlantic ran an article by Clint Smith, about what the United States can learn from Germany about atonement.⁴ Clint discovered that Germany's push to be honest about its past isn't a government-led effort, but is primarily driven by ordinary people and individual calls for reckoning and accountability.

The stumble stones started as an artist's guerilla project, and eventually became sanctioned by local governments. Today, there are more than 116,000 stumbling stones set into the streets and sidewalks of 31 European countries, making up the largest decentralized memorial in the world.⁵

In his article, Clint Smith reflects:⁶

I thought about what it must be like to live in a home where you walk past these stones, and these names, every day. I imagined what it might be like if we had something commensurate in the United States. If, in front of homes, restaurants, office buildings,

churches, and schools there were stones to mark where and when enslaved people had been held, sold, killed ... I imagined [my hometown] New Orleans, once the busiest slave market in the country, and how entire streets would be covered in brass stones—whole neighborhoods paved with reminders of what had happened.

In his article, Smith articulates a truth that is incredibly helpful, as we consider public memory in our country. He writes: “Americans do not have to, and should not, wait for the government to find its conscience. Ordinary people are the conscience.”⁷

Which is where I've found hope and direction this week. To me, it's encouraging that ordinary people can make a difference in national reckoning. Each of us, as individuals, and together as communities, can reclaim the values of our nation at its best. And apply them more expansively than our founding fathers, or our current administration.

We can become the conscience we want this land to have, living out loud God's all-inclusive love, mercy, and justice. Upholding all we hope this country can become. A conscience that tells the truth about our history in a way that holds us accountable, allows us to learn from our mistakes, and to understand upon whose lives our lives were built. To make amends where possible, and to acknowledge how interconnected we are - as we hope for all that we can become. To admire the best in our founding fathers, while admitting the ways they, and we, have fallen short of the ideals they proposed. Looking toward a future in which we live into a more perfect union together.

When Jesus uses the word "perfect" in our Gospel today - "be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect," he's not speaking about being flawless. "Perfect," in this case, stems from *telos*, the Greek word for "goal," "end," or "purpose." The sense of the word is more about becoming what was intended, accomplishing one's God-given purpose. As Jesus uses it here in the Sermon on the Mount, it's a call to live into our God-created identity.⁸ Jesus is encouraging those who follow him to strive to embody God's kingdom values.

If we interpret "perfect" through the lens of Jesus, then working toward a more perfect union involves living into our God-given identity as beloved, and extending God's love, mercy, and justice to all people.

The American dream is audacious, flawed, and, as yet, incomplete in its realization. When it's grounded in God's love and justice for all people, it's a dream we can claim, uphold, and celebrate. May we strive toward living into the dream God has for us and all people. Amen.

¹ <https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/preamble/>

² <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>

³ The Rev. Dr. Andrew Thayer, "In Order To Form A More Perfect Union"; Hope, Despair & How To Celebrate America's Semiquincentennial. Andrew Thayer Studio, July 2, 2026

⁴ "Monuments to the Unthinkable"—In Cover Story, Clint Smith Reports from Germany on What the U.S. Can Learn about Atonement, December, 2022, [theatlantic.com https://www.theatlantic.com/press-releases/archive/2022/11/clint-smith-december-cover-story/672105/](https://www.theatlantic.com/press-releases/archive/2022/11/clint-smith-december-cover-story/672105/)

⁵ As of July 2026

⁶ "Monuments to the Unthinkable"—In Cover Story, Clint Smith Reports from Germany on What the U.S. Can Learn about Atonement, December, 2022, [theatlantic.com https://www.theatlantic.com/press-releases/archive/2022/11/clint-smith-december-cover-story/672105/](https://www.theatlantic.com/press-releases/archive/2022/11/clint-smith-december-cover-story/672105/)

⁷ "Monuments to the Unthinkable"—In Cover Story, Clint Smith Reports from Germany on What the U.S. Can Learn about Atonement, December, 2022, [theatlantic.com https://www.theatlantic.com/press-releases/archive/2022/11/clint-smith-december-cover-story/672105/](https://www.theatlantic.com/press-releases/archive/2022/11/clint-smith-december-cover-story/672105/)

⁸ David Lose, Perfect, Dear Working Preacher, workingpreacher.org, Feb 13, 2011