

Friday after Ash Wednesday, February 24, 2023

Recommended reading: pp. xxii-xxviii, "Origins" (part two)

In describing the creation of "The 1619 Project," Nikole Hannah-Jones writes, "What would it mean to reframe our understanding of U.S. history by considering 1619 as our country's origin point, the birth of our defining contradictions, the seed of so much of what has made us unique? How might that reframing change how we understand the unique problems of the nation today—its stark economic inequality, its violence, its world-leading incarceration rates, its shocking segregation, its political divisions, its stingy social safety net? How might it help us understand the country's best qualities, developed over a centuries-long struggle for freedom, equality, and pluralism, a struggle whose DNA can also be traced to 1619? How would looking at contemporary American life through this lens help us better appreciate the contributions of Black Americans—not only to our culture but also to our democracy itself?... I wanted people to know the date 1619 and to contemplate what it means that slavery predates nearly every other institution in the United States."

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:15-25a)

Lutherans are used to dealing with paradox. We talk of being both saint and sinner at the same time, of being held in captivity to sin even though Christ has set us free. We talk of scripture being both Law and Gospel at the same time. We talk about living in both the "now" and the "not yet" of God's kingdom. "The 1619 Project" highlights a confounding paradox at the heart of the American experience: a land founded on principles of equality continues to systematically deny equality to some of its citizens. Nikole Hannah-Jones believes it is because slavery existed this country more than 150 years before the drafting of the Declaration of Independence.

Prayer

God of compassion, you accept us as we are, but you never leave us as you found us. You work tirelessly to free us from anything that keeps us from our full potential as individuals, as communities, and as a nation. Help us to trust in your guidance, even as we wrestle with the darkest facts of history. Amen.