And he sent them out two by two, and gave them authority... and they cast out many demons, and cured many who were sick. Can you imagine? These 12 ordinary, working-class men have been with Jesus for some time now—watching in awe as he drove demons out of a possessed man, raised a little girl from the dead, healed a woman who'd been bleeding 12 long years.

These dozen simple men who've spent time with living their Rabbi, their friend, their Lord. They've heard Jesus' powerful teaching and witnessed his miracles first-hand—seen him free people from the yoke of illness and isolation—to return to their communities, restored and whole again.

And now, the disciples are themselves called to action. I wonder what they're thinking, as Jesus sends them out with these explicit instructions: go without food, without money, without lodging—without essential resources. Go forth, depending on the hospitality of strangers.

I try to imagine how I might feel in a similar situation—sent into unchartered territory, without the creature comforts I depend upon. Sent to act with authority in Jesus' name. Surely the disciples felt no small measure of trepidation, ambivalence, and doubt. *Are you sure, Teacher, that you want to send us? We are not miracle workers. We are not equipped.*

But send them Jesus does. And though they bring next to nothing, they have, at least, each other, as Jesus intentionally sends them two by two. Will that be enough? Will they have what they need to do the work Jesus has given them to do?

Mark's Gospel tells us that indeed, the disciples journey forth and successfully cast out many demons and cure many people. This success ensues despite the fact that the disciples are sent not from a position of power, wealth, and notoriety, but from a position of deep vulnerability.

St. Paul, too, dwells within a similar vulnerable space. Paul, who as a frail, aging man, carries out Christ's mission from within the walls of his prison cells. Paul, who three times appeals to God to remove the thorn from his flesh—is told, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

"Power is made perfect in weakness." What a stark contradiction to the world's message that we should seek and cling to power at all costs. That we should exude strength, maintain the upper hand—and not expose our vulnerabilities to others. In our society, power found in weakness is a distinct oxymoron. It would seem there is great tension between God's version of power, and ours.

And yet, isn't Scripture filled with such tensions? Our Lord and Savior was a carpenter, not a king. St. Paul was once Saul, persecutor of early Christians. The apostles, unassuming men of ordinary means, were called to become leaders in the greatest revolution humanity has ever seen.

Life today, as well, is filled with such tensions. Many of us are returning with relief—even celebration—to some semblance of normal, even as many others are still grappling with the ongoing emotional, physical, and financial effects of this devastating pandemic. The fact is, the presence of tension and the dualities that lie in our varied experiences do not invalidate what may be your truth or mine.

Today's national holiday is a case in point. Consider the infamous words from the Declaration of Independence: "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." We know that when our founding fathers penned those words, they were not, in fact, self-evident to all.

For our country's history is fraught with dualities: the first pilgrims started new lives in a land stolen from its native people. The prosperity our country has enjoyed these past several hundred years was built on the blood, sweat, and tears of a race of enslaved people. And though we've arguably come a long way since emancipation, we may be asking ourselves, how self-evident are these words, even today?

For if you ask someone what their experience is of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in this country, the response can look *very* different, depending on who's answering the question.

A few months back, I was talking to a friend of mine, catching up on her life in Arizona and mine here in Maryland. We served together in the Navy, and despite holding quite different political views, we've remained friends for over 30 years. During this call, my friend asked how, as a veteran, I felt about athletes kneeling during the national anthem. I thought about it for maybe 10 seconds or so, well aware of the of the underlying tension in her question. And then I carefully replied that just because I will always stand for the national anthem doesn't mean I can't accept that others might not. And that she and I served our country to defend people's right to do just that. Two things can be true at once: I

can say I proudly served the world's greatest democracy, while also being deeply disturbed by the persistent inequities woven through the fabric of our nation.

As I thought more about that discussion, I realized that my response was rooted in a more important truth: that is, I'm not incensed by those who choose to protest injustice in different ways, primarily because my identity as an American—precious as that is—is secondary to my identity as a Christian.

Whatever walk of life we come from, whatever corner of the country or the globe, whatever our political affiliation or socioeconomic circumstances, as disciples of Christ, our identity, first and foremost, is rooted firmly in the unshifting foundation of the freedom we have in Christ.

And just as the disciples went forth without essential resources, we are sent as well—no matter how vulnerable our life circumstances, no matter our ambivalence, no matter the hatred and vitriol we face in our society. Together as Christ's One Body, under God's plan and providence, we stand empowered and equipped to cast out darkness and heal a hurting world.

As disciples of Christ, our mission and purpose are unwavering in the face of adversity, insurrection, and division—and independent of whether our friends or neighbors share our views. In the face of rejection, we can shake the dust off our feet, knowing there is but one view that guides our course: the glorious view of the gates of the kingdom of heaven.

Many of us will spend time today with family and friends, at barbeques, at the pool, enjoying fireworks—in celebration of our nation's freedom. I feel grateful to live in this great democracy, even as I'm keenly aware that experience can look *very* different, depending on your race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender affiliation, financial status, and mental and physical abilities.

The duality of celebrating our country's independence, even as we struggle for justice and equality for a great many of our brothers and sisters, doesn't bother me. Two opposing things *can* be true at once. We experience both pain and joy. Both pride and shame. Grief and celebration. Discord and harmony. Fragility and strength.

Our sense of identity as Americans may fluctuate with the times and seasons. After all, our nation today looks quite different than it did 245 years ago: today we are a vibrant mix of races, religions, and cultures—and becoming even more so day by day.

Whatever our various positions on today's holiday, as the One Body, *we* are at least united in one thing: our faith in Jesus Christ. To this we can hold fast as unchanging and eternal.

May we continue to fight the good fight and get in good trouble, for the health of our nation—but more importantly for the glory of God's kingdom. The road ahead may seem long, and often dark. But we can take heart that our purpose is greater than any one government or any one declaration. Our mission derives from our Baptismal promises: as we persevere in resisting evil, seek and serve Christ in all persons, strive for justice and peace, and respect the dignity of every human being.

Like the first disciples we are sent: empowered and equipped not by the world's standards but by the authority given us by Jesus. He sends us out of our comfort zones, from our places of ambivalence, and into the unknown: to proclaim the Gospel, to cast out forces of darkness, to heal a hurting world.

As St. Paul said, "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Let us accept our weaknesses, rejoicing in the strength of the Body of Christ and go forth in the one unequivocally self-evident truth: that we are saved by the cross and free to follow the way of Jesus, in serving and loving our neighbors and our Lord, with all our hearts and minds and souls.