

# **“American Voices”**

**July 3, 2011**

**Dramatic Reading by Phil, Elizabeth, James & Rebecca Thompson**

The script was compiled and edited by Phil Thompson

*The script is a dialogue between Paul’s letter to the Romans (7:15-25a) and a selection of American voices from 1776 to 2011, which were pulled from a variety of sources.*

*Lines in italics are from Romans 7:15-25a*

VOICE #1: We begin our dialogue in Massachusetts, where patriot Abigail Adams writes to her husband John, a delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, and chairman of the committee to draft a statement of independence from Great Britain. March 1776.

VOICE #2: Dear John, "I long to hear that you have declared an independency. And, by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.

VOICE #3: July 1776 - Mr. Adam’s committee presents its work.

VOICE #4: 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.

*VOICE #1: For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*

VOICE #3: Of course that was not a law, but a declaration. However, eleven years later in 1787

ALL: We the People of the United States,

VOICE #2: in Order to form a more perfect Union,

VOICE #4: establish justice,

VOICE #1: insure domestic Tranquility,

VOICE #3: provide for the common defense,

VOICE #4: promote the general welfare

VOICE #2: and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,

ALL: do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

VOICE #4: Of course there was no provision for the ladies, no enumerated rights for anyone else for that matter. But four years later we made things *better* by adopting the bill of rights.

VOICE #1: *For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self.*

VOICE #3: But who exactly qualifies as a “lady” or even a “woman?” In 1851 at a women’s rights meeting in Ohio, the freed slave Sojourner Truth pointed out. . . .

VOICE #4: That man over there say a woman needs to be helped into carriages  
and lifted over ditches  
and to have the best place everywhere.  
Nobody ever helped me into carriages  
or over mud puddles  
or gives me a best place. . .  
And ain't I a woman?  
Look at me  
Look at my arm!  
I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns  
and no man could head me. . .  
And ain't I a woman?  
I could work as much  
and eat as much as a man--  
when I could get to it--  
and bear the lash as well  
and ain't I a woman?  
I have born 13 children  
and seen most all sold into slavery  
and when I cried out a mother's grief  
none but Jesus heard me. . .  
and ain't I a woman?  
that little man in black there say  
a woman can't have as much rights as a man  
cause Christ wasn't a woman  
Where did your Christ come from?  
From God and a woman!  
Man had nothing to do with him!  
If the first woman God ever made  
was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone,  
together women ought to be able to turn it  
right side up again.

VOICE #1: *We know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.*

VOICE #2: Sojourner Truth was really asking “who is a *person*?”

VOICE #4: In 1857, the U. S. Supreme Court had one answer, in the case of Dred Scott vs Sandford.

VOICE #3: The Constitution of the United States recognizes slaves as property, and pledges the Federal Government to protect it. And Congress cannot exercise any more authority over *property* of that description than it may constitutionally exercise over *property* of any other kind.

VOICE #2: By 1860, about 4 million Americans were *property* belonging to other Americans.

VOICE #4: The next year the Civil War began. Before it was over 600,000 Americans were killed by other Americans. Another half million were wounded.

VOICE #1: *Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from the body of death?*

VOICE #3: The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they *did* here. It is for us *the living* rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for *us* to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us – that from these *honored dead* we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave *the last full measure of devotion* – that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in *vain*, that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people; for the people shall not perish from the earth. Abraham Lincoln, 1863.

VOICE #1: Two years later, Amendment 13 to the U.S. Constitution:

VOICE #2: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, shall exist within the United States.

VOICE #1: In 1868, the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

VOICE #4: All persons born or naturalized in the United States are citizens of the United States.

VOICE #2: Well almost. Two years after the Nez Perce tribe was captured and deported from their native Oregon to a reservation in Oklahoma, Chief Joseph was taken to visit Washington, D.C. where he met many dignitaries. Here is what he told President Rutherford B. Hayes:

VOICE #1: When I think of our condition, my heart is heavy. I see men of my own race treated as outlaws and driven from country to country, or shot down like animals.

We ask to be recognized as men.

When the white man treats the Indian as they treat each other, then we shall have no more wars. We shall be all alike -- brothers of one father and mother, with one sky above us and one country around us and one government for all. Then the Great Spirit Chief who rules above will *smile* upon this land and send rain to *wash out* the bloody spots made by brothers' hands upon the face of the earth. *For this time* the Indian race is waiting and praying. I hope no more groans of wounded men and women will *ever* go to the ear of the Great Spirit Chief above, and that all people may be one people.

Hin mah too yah, lat-kate has spoken for his people.

VOICE #2: Success is counted sweetest  
By those who ne'er succeed.  
To comprehend a nectar  
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple host  
Who took the flag today  
Can tell the definition,  
So clear, of victory

As he, defeated, dying,  
On whose forbidden ear  
The distant strains of triumph  
Break agonized and clear!  
Emily Dickinson

VOICE #1: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the thing I hate.*

VOICE #4: The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment also says that no state shall deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

VOICE #3: But what if America is at war? What does an American look like?

VOICE #2: For that matter what does an enemy look like?

VOICE #4: And what can happen to those people who look like the enemy?

VOICE #2: In 1943 President Franklin Roosevelt said, "The principle on which this country was founded and by which it has always been governed is that Americanism is a matter of mind and heart; Americanism is not, and never was a matter of race or ancestry".

VOICE #3: However, only a year earlier, Roosevelt authorized incarceration for 110,000 Japanese Americans, adults and children, immigrants and citizens alike. 41 years later, in 1983, a U.S. Congressional commission uncovered evidence from the 1940s, that there had never been *military* necessity for the unequal, unjust treatment of Japanese Americans.

VOICE #1: But I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members.

VOICE #4: Despite the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment some states did enact laws that enforced distinctions based on race. In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled:

VOICE #2: Legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts or to abolish distinctions based on physical differences, and the attempt to do so can only result in accentuating the differences of the present situation. If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them on the same plane. *Plessy v Ferguson*

VOICE #1: "Separate but equal" was the legal justification of segregation for nearly 60 years. Even when overturned, the outcome of the struggle for civil rights was far from certain. In 1951 the poet Langston Hughes wrote:

VOICE #3:                   What happens to a dream - - deferred?  
                                  Does it dry up  
                                  like a raisin in the sun?  
                                  Or fester like a sore—  
                                  And then run?  
                                  Does it stink like rotten meat?  
                                  Or crust and sugar over—  
                                  like a syrupy sweet?  
  
                                  Maybe it just sags  
                                  like a heavy load.  
  
                                  Or does it - - explode?

VOICE #4:    Nine years after Brown v Board of Education declared that segregation was unconstitutional, Martin Luther King Jr. found himself in Birmingham, Alabama under arrest for demonstrating against - - segregation. Eight Birmingham clergymen sent King a letter, as a fellow minister, asking him to slow down, to be more respectful of the local authorities, and asking how could he justify violating the law. He was accused of being an extremist. He responded with a letter, written from the Birmingham jail.

VOICE #3:    April 16, 1963.  
                  My Dear Fellow Clergymen:

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something *within* has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something *without* has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides--and try to understand why he must do so. I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist. But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love?

VOICE #2:    "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which spitefully use you, and persecute you."

VOICE #3:    Was not Amos an extremist for justice?

VOICE #1:    "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."

VOICE #3:    Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel?

VOICE #4: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."

VOICE #3: Was not Martin Luther an extremist?

VOICE #2: "Here I stand; I can do no other, so help me God."

VOICE #3: And Abraham Lincoln?

VOICE #4: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free."

VOICE #3: And Thomas Jefferson?

VOICE #2: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that *all* men are created equal ..."

VOICE #3: So the question is not *whether* we will be extremists, but *what kind* of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love?

VOICE #1: *For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self.*

VOICE #4: In 2006, voters in Colorado adopted an amendment to the state constitution that defined marriage exclusively as a union between a man and a woman. Because 56% of the voters approved the measure, it is the law of our state. Is it the end of the story?

VOICE #1: Republican State Senator Mark Grisanti, Buffalo, New York:

VOICE #2: "I apologize to those I offend, but I believe you can be wiser today than yesterday. I believe our state needs to provide equal rights and protections for all its residents." June 2011.

VOICE #3: We live in a land of possibilities where we have learned, painfully, that we *can* extend liberty and justice toward all, when we try.

VOICE #4: But remember, sexism did not come to an abrupt end one fine day.

VOICE #3: Nor has racism perished from the earth.

VOICE #4: Even if the Colorado marriage law were to be repealed, homophobia won't go away quietly.

VOICE #1: *When we want to do right, evil lies close at hand.*

VOICE #3: But the spirit gives us hope. For the arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice.

VOICE #4: On the cover of your bulletin this morning is a photograph from 1998. Five young girls at kindergarten graduation at Avondale Elementary School in Birmingham, Alabama, two miles from the Birmingham jail.

VOICE #2: No extremists here!! Just Shayna, me (Rebecca), Lani, Genie, and Lauren. Or maybe we were extremists. A generation earlier, when Dr. King was in jail down the street, such a photograph would have been considered vulgar and threatening by polite society. Today it is a sweet reminder of good friends.

VOICE #1: The arc of history has bent. As you celebrate Independence Day, we hope you will remember *these* ladies. May we be generous and favorable to them. We have overcome much. Monarchy, civil war, slavery, segregation, Who knows what they shall overcome.

VOICE #4: As we move into a time of silent reflection, we leave you with a final word of hope from Langston Hughes.

VOICE #2:

When I get to be a composer  
I'm gonna write me some music about  
Daybreak in Alabama  
And I'm gonna put the purtiest songs in it  
Rising out of the ground like a swamp mist  
And falling out of heaven like soft dew.  
I'm gonna put some tall *tall* trees in it  
And the scent of pine needles  
And the smell of red clay after rain  
And long red necks  
And poppy colored faces  
And big brown arms  
And the field-daisy eyes  
Of black and white black white black people  
And I'm gonna put white hands  
And black hands and brown and yellow hands  
And red clay earth hands in it  
Touching everybody with kind fingers  
And touching each other natural as dew  
In that dawn of music when I  
Get to be a composer  
And write about daybreak  
In Alabama.

(NOTE: We will end the silence with the hymn, "Lift Every Voice and Sing".)