

The Promise

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Some 250 years ago, a group of wealthy white men gathered together, put pen to paper, and conceived of one of the most dangerous ideas the world had ever known.

"All men are created equal."

Make no mistake. To the men in that room, those words were never intended to be inclusive. They reflected exactly who they believed mattered: themselves, and people just like them.

But they made one extraordinary mistake.

They wrote the promise down.

And once the promise existed, people demanded this country live up to it.

For 250 years, Americans have been fighting over the same question:

Who gets to be equal?

Because every time that promise expanded, America grew stronger.

Harriet Tubman looked at that promise and demanded it apply to her and her people. She risked her life over and over again to make this country live up to its own ideals. And America grew stronger.

The suffragists demanded their voices be heard and their votes counted. And America grew stronger.

Workers organized and fought for dignity and fairness. And America grew stronger.

The Tuskegee Airmen demanded the opportunity to serve a country that still questioned their worth. And America grew stronger.

The Civil Rights Movement demanded equal protection under the law. And America grew stronger.

Stonewall demanded that LGBTQ Americans be allowed to exist openly and equally. And America grew stronger.

American history is the story of ordinary people standing up, fighting back, and insisting that the promise include them.

And every time they won, America grew stronger.

Who gets to be equal?

That question is our legacy.

I can trace my family's history in this country back to 1740, when a petty thief in London named Samuel Smitherman was sentenced to seven years of indentured servitude in the American colonies.

When Samuel was born, the promise did not exist.

He was born into a world where some people were more equal than others.

Kings above subjects.

Masters above servants.

The powerful above everyone else.

That was the way of the world.

By the time Thomas Jefferson put the promise on paper, Samuel was an old man.

A free man.

"All men are created equal."

Did Jefferson have Samuel Smitherman in mind?

Probably not.

But Samuel claimed that promise.

Because my family is still here.

For nearly twelve generations, we have lived under the shadow and shelter of that promise.

Not because it's perfect.

Not because it included everyone.

But because it gave ordinary people something they had never been given before.

Hope!

And that is the point.

The promise did not expand because power became generous.

It expanded because people fought and died so that hope survived.

All men are created equal.

Ya see, when those words hit paper...

They weren't thinking about the Indigenous people who already lived on this continent. They were not equal.

They weren't thinking about the enslaved people stolen from around the world to build this new nation. They were not equal.

They weren't thinking about the women they loved, married, depended upon, and built families with. They were not equal.

History is remarkably consistent.

Those who hold power write laws to protect power.

They never surrender it willingly.

Women vote today not because powerful men suddenly decided women deserved an equal voice.

Women organized.

They marched.

They endured ridicule, violence, arrest, and imprisonment.

They kept fighting until those in power had no choice but to give ground.

And America grew stronger.

The Civil Rights Movement expanded the promise.

America grew stronger.

Stonewall expanded the promise.

America grew stronger.

It has always been the same fight.

Not Democrats versus Republicans.

Not left versus right.

The fight has always been about who gets to define equality.

Who gets to belong.

Who matters.

Who gets remembered.

Today, we are living through another attempt to shrink the promise.

We have an administration determined to decide who belongs, who gets to be equal, whose contributions matter, and even whose existence deserves to be acknowledged.

Immigrants are blamed.

The trans community is vilified.

Vulnerable people see the services they depend on stolen while their rights are stripped away.

All of it, so that power can be concentrated in fewer hands.

Because if they can erase our history, diminish our struggles, belittle our victories and remove our names from the record, they can claim this country was built by people like them, for people like them.

They want Americans to believe our freedoms are gifts handed down by the powerful. Like manna from Heaven.

That our rights exist because of their generosity.

That we should be grateful.

But that has never been the truth.

No amount of scrubbing names from museums or rewriting history can change the simple fact that this country was not built by billionaires.

It was not built by plantation owners.

It was not built by Fortune 500 CEOs.

It was built by ordinary people.

People who suffered.

People who struggled.

People who believed the promise belonged to them.

People like you. People like me.

Every generation has had its moment.

Harriet Tubman.

The suffragists.

Selma.

Stonewall.

Now it's our moment. We inherited the promise from our ancestors, and we owe it to our own descendants to step up and win this fight once and for all.

I dream of the day we stop fighting over who gets to be equal and simply welcome everyone to the table.

That day will come.

For 250 years, Americans have fought to expand the promise.

A promise big enough for everyone.

In a country big enough for everyone.

But we will never reach that future if we surrender the promise to those who would hoard wealth, power, and opportunity while deciding who is worthy of the scraps.

So, my message today is simple.

Vote.

Organize.

Protest.

March.

Stand together.

Do whatever you must.

But don't wait for someone else to hand your rights back to you.

If you believe the promise belongs to you...

Claim it.

That's what Americans have been doing for 250 years.

That's the promise.