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"Which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? (Matt 9:6).

The universal church has no agenda in selecting liturgical readings to fit national holidays, but the Word of God always seems to address the occasion by inviting Christians to reflect on our specific challenges for July 4, the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Today's two readings will provide plenty of themes for preachers and all believers to ask hard questions about our national ideals measured against our actual history and current performance. We mark this remembrance of the start of the process that enabled the original thirteen colonies to gain their freedom and to set a course in history that produced the United States of America.

The story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, reminds us of the barbaric practice of human sacrifice to gain celestial favor. It also confronts us with the many ways modern societies have also sacrificed their children, to the god of war, to economic systems that built wealth on the backs of the poor, slave labor, selective immigration, gender inequality and racial prejudice.

God checks the hand of Abraham to save Isaac, but how many beloved sons were sacrificed to build an America that displaced its original inhabitants, deprived millions of African people of their liberty and often their lives to make it possible for others to enjoy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"

Can the celebration of our American identity include any sober consideration of the cost of history to so many of our current citizens, still struggling to find their rightful

place at the table? We acknowledge both progress and regress, advances achieved with compromises that defied our ideals, a bloody war to end slavery, a violent backlash to reimpose it with terror, benchmarks for equality followed by the resurgence of nativism and the ugly politics of social division.

Today's Gospel story of the paralyzed man who needed both inner and outer healing reminds us that without truth there can be no reconciliation, and without reconciliation there will be no peace. Is America mature enough to admit its racial past, its failures to provide justice for minorities, the irony of rejecting new immigrants to a land built by our own immigrant ancestors?

Without the truth, we will remain paralyzed. Without mutual forgiveness, our diverse but divided society will be unable to walk. Jesus knew that everything was connected, and he provided both inner and outer redemption to a paralyzed sinner because four friends had had the faith to carry him there.

Who will be those four friends for America, one symbolic representative from each camp, willing to lay down their differences to find the common ground where together we can celebrate this holiday?

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