



Vision and Reality

Elizabeth Dilley
MESA Team Leader

In 1215, at Runnymede in England, King John signed the Magna Carta. The mythos surrounding this document as a foundational text of Western democracy, which ensured that even kings were subject to the rule of law, inspired the those who drafted the founding documents of the United States. I confess I was taught this mythos and believed in its fundamental truths, so much so that in 2008, when I first encountered the Magna Carta at Salisbury Cathedral, I wept openly at seeing those words on paper.

I was reminded of the words in Philippians 2:6-7, “Though [Jesus] was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. But he emptied himself...” To think that someone with so much power over others would voluntarily limit their power and share it is extraordinary. Giving up power to the people was, ironically, the most Godlike thing a king could ever do!

To be sure, the Magna Carta did propose some sharing of power, but not by all the people. And it did inform the creation of the United States Constitution, although not all people were included in its original promises. These are very human documents, not divine ones. Over the many years of my life, I have often wept for the ways these promises have (and have not) been lived into in our nation. I have wept for all who believed in the promise of equality under the law, for the ways that lie has been laid bare in the United States (over and over again—there are too many examples to share), and for the ways that this promise still shapes our vision and hope for who we can be.

So in 2024, when the Supreme Court granted absolute immunity for a president’s “official acts,” I wept again. I wept because that promise taught to us about the Magna Carta—that

no one is above the rule of law, even a king!—seems further away today than it did a year ago. I wept because some people get to hide behind a shield of “official acts” as a cover for theft and even murder, while others do not even get the shield of law to protect them from extrajudicial beatings and execution. And now the president, the most powerful individual in the nation, is covered in such a shield as to essentially protect him from any accountability for actions taken while in office.

But I also remember this: even though the Magna Carta was not a document protecting all the rights of all people, and even though its technical aspects were ignored by the original signatories, and even though it could not inspire our nation’s founders to grant liberty to women or those who had been enslaved—even despite all this: the vision persists. All of us are granted the same freedoms and the same responsibilities. Sure, individually, a president is powerful. But collectively, the people are more powerful still. That power comes to us from Jesus Christ, and nothing is stronger than him.

So we weep, but we do not despair.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Elizabeth Dilley serves as the Minister and Team Leader for the Ministerial Excellence, Support and Authorization (MESA) ministry team in the national setting of the United Church of Christ.

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