

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Freedom or Chains

Galatians 3.28

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Unity is at the heart of Christian life. That we are made one in Christ is one of the great spiritual ideals of the Gospel. Jesus fervently prayed for this in John 17, that we would be one as God is one. All through Scripture, the churches are encouraged, begged, cajoled to protect and deepen their unity in Christ. Christian unity is a witness to the eternal love of the Triune God. Yet this bold idea crashes headlong into the reality that humans are a tough bunch to get together for very long.

Our New Testament reading this morning takes us into the heart of the letter to the Galatians. In this letter, the Apostle Paul is exasperated with the Galatian Christians for retreating from the gospel of grace in Christ to a gospel of the law's divisions and demands. Paul's never shy about saying that Christian life is shaped by moral formation by God in Christ and never shy about lifting high-- very high--expectations for the way we live our lives with one another under God. But he's adamant that Christ has brought about a new way of being in the world in which we each become part of the community of new creation. Those in Christ have become new and renewed.

In one of the most power-packed lines in all of scripture, we read in Galatians 3.27: *As many of you were baptized into Christ have put on Christ*. To put on Christ isn't just to wear Christianly things on the outside but to be transformed all the way through by what you put on. Not just put on a new shirt with a catchy Jesus slogan, but to put on Jesus. And in Jesus, Paul insists, everyone can wear this garment: there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, there is not male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now stop trying to play games with your differences; you're all one in Christ, so act like it. Start being who you are. Paul was very direct with the Galatians.

Easier said than done. The force of our differences is a strong centrifugal force propelling us apart from one another in difference only to come crashing back toward one another in conflict. 1st century Christians weren't immune to this, and Paul goes right at the heart of it: Jews/ Gentiles, slave/free, male/female.

Each of these three pairs is pair of opposites. Jews and Gentiles were in opposition. If you're not a Jew then you're a Gentile. "Slave and free" speaks for itself. Slavery goes back a long way through human history and the Romans practiced it widely. It wasn't exactly the racially-based, lifetime indentured chattel slavery practiced in England and America, but it wasn't an easy way of life either for those enslaved. Male and female are opposites, too, certainly in how men and women functioned in society. In all this, here's this radical claim: In Christ, the differences that separate Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female are smudged out.

But are they? Not so easily. Someone has a stake in the keeping the differences the differences. Each of these three pairs is not just an opposite, but a power imbalance. In Roman society, Gentiles had advantages over Jews, but in the Galatian church, it seems the Jewish Christians had the upper hand. There's a tension here, you can feel it: a conflict brewing, a power dynamic being abused. Slave and free is obviously a power dynamic of the worst kind. One person owns or controls another. Male and female was definitely a power dynamic. Men had power over women in every aspect of 1st-century life.

So, what did all this mean? At the very least it is a prophetic word that in Christ, the unity experienced may not wipe away individual identities, but it wipes away the power imbalances that define most human relationships. I suspect this list wasn't even intended to be exhaustive, but representative so that what it means is that in putting on Christ we are made into a community in which men and women, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles, and on and on are defined less by their social distinctions but by their unity in Christ. The enslaved and the free stand shoulder to shoulder in the church. Men and women use their voices, hearts, and minds to lead and serve. Jews and Gentiles are made one. A vision of a new kind of community in which all are welcome, all are made whole, and all find their wholeness in the presence of one another and their God in whose image they're all made.

There's a lot we could talk about here, but on Juneteenth, I'm contemplating this biblical claim that slave and free is over in Christ. It's not clear that Paul was trying to end Roman slavery when he wrote this. Paul didn't have a grand plan for social justice or thought he could reform the Empire's laws, institutions, or culture. Rather he was focused on creating communities "that were outposts of life in Christ, assemblies of people relating to one another" in a way that was in accord with Christ's life and in anticipation of Christ's return. (Jane Patterson)

The mission of the apostle, and the apostolic mission of the church in every generation, is to prepare people to relate to one another as though they were in the very presence of God and as though the Holy Spirit were really in their midst and as if the resurrected Christ were truly with them and as if all are made in the image of God and worthy to be loved. Because you *are* in the very presence of God, the Holy Spirit is really in your midst, the resurrected Christ is with you, and you are all made in the image of God and worthy to be loved.

The fledgling Christian communities and the apostles had no authority to end slavery, but here as in Philemon as in 1 Corinthians 7, the distinctions were abolished between slaves, freed people, and free people before God. The Spirit pushed the life-giving, reconciling effects of the cross into the world God was saving.

We could only wish in retrospect that Christians had taken up this mantle all over the world and extended its logic from abolition of distinctions in the church between slaves and freed people to abolition of slavery and so freedom for all people. But this did not happen. Christians didn't always have the ability to make wide-scale changes in the world, but Christian influence didn't end Roman slavery in the empire, and it didn't end the practice in the centuries that followed the fall of Rome.

England and America, to bring it to modern times, replete with Christians in government, and white cultural leadership in every way, not only tolerated slavery but accepted it and benefitted from it and integrated the capture, transport, and enslavement of black people into their economics and thus into their theology. It is the shame of the church and the original sin of our nation.

And there's no getting around it or soft-serving it or whitewashing it or gaslighting it or making it nice or making it understandable or explaining it away or pretending it didn't happen or saying 'it wasn't me; I wasn't there. I'm not to blame.' or saying race didn't matter or saying it's just an unfortunate unpleasantness of history. It was an evil; it is an evil. It's a failure of theological imagination and moral courage. And it really wasn't that long ago. And we wear that.

And so, thanks be to God; thanks to God for the redemption of us all that on June 19, 1865, Major General Granger went from streetcorner to church step in Galveston and read the order making sure it was finally heard by everyone: "The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free." Never has bureaucratic language been so theologically electric. The order made literal what should have been made true generations before, "On this day, there is no slave or free."

This moment, now celebrated as our newest national holiday has been celebrated for generations long before it was nationalized. We mark this day not just as a national holiday but for us, as the beginning of a time of reflection on God's justice and God's promise of peace. A time to reflect on the meaning of Juneteenth as a long-delayed fulfillment of the aspirations of Independence Day, and the meaning of Independence Day as a promise still yet unfulfilled as long as racism creates distinctions and power dynamics of just the sort the Gospel of Jesus Christ abolishes.

The emancipation of those enslaved in the 1860s didn't suddenly create a utopia for anyone. It took the next 100 years for civil rights laws to begin to codify and protect what was intended by the emancipation proclamation and by the Gospel of Jesus Christ in whom we are all one.

The work still continues. And it's still unnerving to some people that the work continues. I think the townspeople in today's Gospel story give a pretty good image of human nature. They had this man, this monster among them they didn't know what to do with. They couldn't kill him or heal him, and they couldn't control him, but they'd sort of figured out how to handle him. He's a man Jesus encountered but also a parable of anything powerfully demonic we make uncomfortable peace with. He roamed the wilds and lived in and amongst the tombs. When Jesus asked his name, he responded Legion. Legion, the name everyone would know is the name of a Roman force of 5000 warriors, a powerful force, seemingly impossible to overcome. Maybe the townspeople didn't like what was happening to this man and to them, and what he had become and what they'd become and what his presence said about them, but they didn't

know what to do about it and felt powerless to do anything. So, they didn't; they just tried to corral the beast as best as they could. But he kept breaking their chains.

But Jesus is even more powerful than a legion of demons. He casts them out of the man into a herd of pigs who run themselves off a cliff into the water and drown. The man is now free, yet still, all is not well. When the townspeople come out, he is sitting at Jesus's feet, in the pose of a disciple, clothed, in his right mind. He is no threat to anyone anymore, so why are they afraid? Yet they are. Maybe even more now than they were before. Twice, Luke tells us they were afraid—of the man I guess, of Jesus, of a power that turned upside down the status quo they'd made uncomfortable peace with. The one thing people like less than a threat they know is the unknown threat they don't know. And what they don't like more than that is when the rules change. But the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ messes with the rules.

They weren't too sure they wanted that. They'd rather stay shackled, and I think that's the takeaway from the Gerasenes. The man was free of his demons, but the townspeople were still chained to theirs. It's a parable of human nature. In the presence of the Prince of Peace, he who sets us free, the Savior, they are still in their own chains only because they choose to stay there. "Go away from us," they say to Jesus. "Leave us be."

And so, he does. Jesus leaves them. But in his wake, he leaves behind a reminder for them and every generation, this man. This man whose very existence is witness to the transformative power of the gospel for freedom and for hope from Galatia to Galveston to Washington to Birmingham to Minneapolis, that the church in every outpost in the world could still become the people God called them to be. I hear he still goes through the cities and countryside, telling how much Jesus has done for him. He is witness to all who still struggle to break free from the chains that bind them and blind them from the grace of God that has already set them free and cast their demons into the dark abyss.

He tells the story of the Savior, the Liberator who unlocks hands for the embrace of brotherhood, and who looses voices in holy sigh of the old spiritual—thank God almighty, I'm free, at last.

Thanks be to God.