

Divine Disruption
A sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – June 19, 2022

Please Read:
Galatians 3:23-29
Luke 8:26-39

The juxtaposition of Juneteenth with our two lectionary texts that have to do with unity in diversity, and freedom from bondage is profound. Today is the first of a long string of Sundays marking “Ordinary time,” and it is during the coming weeks when we will reflect more deeply on how the Holy Spirit disturbs and disrupts wherever there is need for greater unity in diversity and freedom from bondage!

Most of you have heard of *Juneteenth*, but it has only been a federal holiday commemorating the anniversary of the final emancipation of enslaved African Americans since last year. Originating in Galveston, Texas, it has been celebrated annually on June 19th in various parts of the United States since 1865. So today is the 157th anniversary since the announcement of General Order No. 3 by Union Army general Gordon Granger, proclaiming freedom for enslaved people in Texas, the last state of the Confederacy with institutional slavery.

Our gospel lesson is a powerful story of the liberation of a man caught up in the systems of exclusion and bondage, literally in chains, and living among the dead. The place is significant, as it is across the lake in what was gentile territory, as well as a place of the dead and where swine were kept. This was like the ritually worst possible place for a devout Jew to go, as it was considered unclean to touch anything to do with the dead, as well as anything to do with pigs. The fact that the man is demon-possessed makes this seem strange and otherworldly to us, unless you’ve walked the streets of any major city in the world where eventually you will run into such people, broken, mentally ill, excluded from all normal society and who other people are normally afraid of and will go to great lengths to control. It’s perhaps a touch of political sarcasm that the demons’ name is “Legion,” reminding us of the Roman legion stationed back in Jerusalem to keep Roman’s foot on the neck of the Jewish population there. Coincidentally, the symbol of the legion stationed in Jerusalem was the wild boar.

Part of the message of this story is the fact that Jesus will go anywhere to bring liberation and healing. That’s what he does, and whereas the religious people of his day wouldn’t dream of going to such a place, Jesus includes it in his travels plans. The plot line is familiar in some ways, as Jesus sets the man free from his bondage, but here the locals are not yet ready for the full impact of the gospel liberation power. In fact, they are afraid and beg Jesus to leave. Was it because Jesus disrupted the status quo? Was it because they couldn’t imagine a world where this man who was labeled dangerous and in chains, was now in his right mind and free to become part of everyday society? I wonder if people in our day who complain about Black Lives Matter and the LGBTQ movement have something in common with the people of this gentile area. They really are not ready for what we say every time we pledge allegiance to the flag, “liberty and justice for all.” To many of us are afraid of the stranger, those who are different...

I’m shocked, really, at how many white evangelical Christians seem to think that people of color are a threat to our privileges and benefits. It’s the fallacy that we live in a closed system and are

playing a zero-sum game with limited resources. It was Albert Einstein who once said that the greatest mistake of his career was holding on to the static state theory of the universe for so long. In fact, the universe is dynamic, even expanding. In other words, we worship a God who has infinite and expanding resources who seeks the prosperity, the flourishing of all people. We are called to embrace and evangelize, to share the good news that all people are image of God-bearers, beloved children of God, and worthy of our respect and encouragement to pursue achievement and development, because there is enough for everyone!

I am dismayed at a report that a Texas pastor recently preached a sermon that went viral where he claimed gay men should be lined up against the wall and shot. I was at a meeting recently where another Christian leader made a connection with gun rights and Galatians 5:1, "For freedom, Christ has set you free." What does Christian freedom have to do with AR-15s? Or congresswoman Lauren Boebert who said at a Christian family camp that Christ wouldn't have died on the cross if his followers had AR-15s. Wow... That doesn't sound like the God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ! That doesn't sound like good news to me. That sounds like fear-based bigotry and an endorsement of violence.

So, there are two dimensions our gospel and Galatians texts address: the first is the personal and the second is the systemic. We may identify on a personal level with the demon-possessed man who needs to be liberated from his bondage and restored into the community life. I think of our brothers and sisters in AA or battling various forms of addiction. There are people enslaved by depression, or a low self-esteem, feeling like their life is among the dead, going nowhere. I think of our brothers and sisters in state and federal prisons. They are suffering, as prisons and penitentiaries are generally dehumanizing places. Our prison-system focuses on punitive justice rather than restorative justice, and even my brief exposure makes me sad for those who are there. We must pray for them not to lose hope. Some have committed serious crimes and inflicted evil violence on other innocents, and so we pray for them to be healed and one day set free. But in the meantime, how is our justice system redeeming and restoring them as human beings? Like the man that Jesus goes to set free, the village people were content to leave the man chained among the dead, because for them the man was a lost cause. Jesus, you see, does not give up on *anyone*, but seeks to bring healing redemption and restoration for *everyone*.

In the first century, it was scandalous to claim all are one in Christ Jesus. In *The Forgotten Creed: Christianity's Original Struggle against Bigotry, Slavery, and Sexism*, Stephen Patterson argues that the text that we read today from Galatians is actually something that Paul picked up from other Christians, very likely one of the earliest baptismal creeds.

Most people today don't think of the Christian church as the vanguard for race relations, liberation movements, or gender identity compassion. But here in our Galatians text we read that all are children of God, and that as we have put on Christ in baptism, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Do you hear how "in Christ," a phrase Paul uses over 600 times in his writings, there is this elimination of all of the categories we usually use to exclude people. Being in Christ and living into our baptismal vows creates a new community, a new way of relating to people who in any other social context would be outsiders or separated. But in Christ, we are one...

Have you ever heard the word, *Ubuntu*? It's an African word from the Zulu language. It's actually a word that summarizes a widely held idea in various African cultures and means simply, "I am because we are." The philosophy of Ubuntu gets at the second dimension with which I think we need to read these texts, and that is the social dimension, that there are systemic issues the gospel challenges; there are powers and principalities with which the gospel collides way beyond just the personal dimension. In a positive sense, *I am because we are* recognizes that my identity is always fully formed in the context of community. And in a welcoming and inclusive community that helps me to experience shalom, the peace and wholeness that God intends. I am loved because we are the beloved community, and I am accepted and nurtured for who God has created and called me to be. But in an oppressive system, you could also say, "I am afraid, because we are a fearful and violent people..." You see? This story of the demoniac is about a single man that Jesus liberates, but it is also about a village, a community of people who are afraid. When they experience Jesus' liberating power, they beg him to go away!

So, friends, brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ, the good news is that Jesus has real power to heal and redeem, to liberate and advocate for new life for us as individuals. As Paul says, "before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." Jesus has real power to heal and redeem, to liberate and advocate for us personally, but also for new life as a society, as a town, as a nation.

One last thought, as today is Father's Day I do want to say that part of our role as fathers is to help our children experience this healing and liberation that God offers through Jesus Christ. I'll never forget when I preached a Father's Day sermon in Mexico City as Kim was pregnant with our first child. One of the elders, named Harry Burke, came up to me after the sermon and said dryly, "Scott, that is the most confident Father's Day sermon you'll ever preach!" He was right, *talking about being* a father, and *being* a father are different. The same is true about allowing Jesus to liberate us, to unshackle us from our crazy addictions and prejudices, to set us free for new life where all are truly one in Christ, loved, respected, welcomed as part of God's family.

And so we move into the summer months of Ordinary Time to wrestle with what our freedom means. Novelist Walker Percy, in his essay "The Holiness of the Ordinary," reflects on how the Christian spiritual tradition confers "the highest significance upon the ordinary things of this world: bread, wine, water, touch, breath, words, talking, listening."¹ A world which is itself a sacrament and a mystery. May we welcome God's disruption and disturbance, so our ordinary lives become extraordinary means of God's grace, freedom and healing for us and our world.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

¹ Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (Picador, 1991), 369.