

*True Freedom*

Sermon for the Second Sunday after Pentecost

June 19, 2022

Texts: Galatians 3:23-29 and Luke 8:26-39

Trinity Episcopal Church, Asbury Park

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*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.*

Today our nation observes Juneteenth, sometimes called Emancipation Day. On June 19, 1865, at the conclusion of a Civil War that left over 600,000 dead, peace was finally at hand and the abolition of slavery became effective in the all the former states of the Confederacy. Confederate forces had surrendered in Virginia in April, but the news did not reach Texas until two months later, when Union troops arrived in Galveston Bay. On June 19, General Gordon Granger read General Order Number 3:

"The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free."

Every Juneteenth since, Black communities in our nation have celebrated this Emancipation Day. Growing up in Texas, Juneteenth was a state holiday, but it was not a day widely observed among white residents and white-owned businesses. It was considered a holiday of significance particularly for Black Texans. And unfortunately, Juneteenth was often the focus of racist jokes and even racial violence among some white Texans. Fortunately, things are changing. Juneteenth is being taken more seriously among people of diverse racial groups. Most states now recognize the holiday, including New Jersey. And as of last year, the federal government also recognizes Juneteenth as an official holiday. Asbury Park had a lovely Juneteenth festival yesterday in Springwood Park. I attended, along with a large share of the Vestry, and also many other clergy, staff, and parishioners.

Juneteenth is a holiday we all need to observe. For our society will be truly free when all of its citizens experience freedom.

As St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Galatians today, “all of us are one in Christ Jesus.” “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female.” He’s writing particularly about differences in religious practices among early Christians, some of whom still identified as Jews and followed the rules of the Torah, and others who were Gentiles and did not. But in his argument, he takes it further. There’s nothing that divides us, not our nationality, our social status, or our gender. All of us are one in Christ Jesus. And in next week’s reading, he proclaims, “for freedom Christ has set us free.” He continues, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Love your neighbor as yourself. That’s true freedom.

With that in mind, let’s take a look at today’s gospel reading, about the Gerasene man afflicted by demons. “For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs.” Today we probably would not think of this person as demon-possessed. We would probably diagnose him as suffering from a mental illness, and we would seek to treat him. We would give him clothes and try to find him a place to live among society. But even with the knowledge and resources we have today, there are so many people who suffer and who live without homes. Still so many who are exiled from society and rendered as “untouchable.” While we might or might not believe in evil spirits, there are demonic powers in our world that need to be cast out: Demons of oppression that keep our fellow children of God hungry, homeless, and untreated. Demonic systems of bias that perpetuate hate for the color of people’s skin, for the way they express their gender, and for how and whom they love. The demon of gun violence strikes over and over again in our country, including this week at an Episcopal church outside of Birmingham, St. Stephen’s. I went to seminary with the rector.

And here in our own city, two 14 year olds were arrested this past week for possession of firearms and ammunition. What are we doing? It's time to cast these demons out!

When Jesus healed the demon-possessed man, he set him free. The man who had been healed and set free begged to join Jesus on his journeys. But Jesus told him he needed to go home. "Return home, and declare how much God has done for you." Jesus knew that this man had been cut off from his community and his family for too long. He needed home. And they needed him. "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In healing this man who wandered among the tombs, Jesus set him free. And his freedom was to return home, to rejoin his community, to love his neighbor as himself. When we open our arms and our hearts to others, we set them free and we set ourselves free. When we welcome the stranger, we both become free. When we join in solidarity with our neighbors to advocate for better mental healthcare, for affordable housing, for racial justice, for LGBTQ equality, for women's rights, for reasonable gun control, all of us gain greater freedom. That is how we will love our neighbors as ourselves. Love is an action, and love in action will set us free.

"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."

May it be so. In the love of Christ, may we all be free.