

Freedom Season!

July 2, 2023

Slavery

We're situated in an interesting spot on the calendar today, between Juneteenth Day, the celebration of enslaved people in Texas finally getting word of their freedom, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, and the Fourth of July, what our nation has dubbed Independence Day. I'm of a mind that we need to celebrate the time in between these two holidays as a season. If we call the time between Thanksgiving and New Years the Christmas Season, then I'm campaigning that the time between Juneteenth and the Fourth of July be Freedom Season!

The passage from the Letter to the Romans we're about to read uses slavery imagery, and I'll be honest, as a 21st century progressive white woman in the U.S., talking about slavery in any other context than the atrocities that were perpetrated against Africans in this country is difficult for me. It's difficult, because I am so acutely aware that any use of the term "slavery" that I will use will fall woefully short of the depth and complexity of the horrors enslaved people experienced, and indeed the legacy their ancestors continue to carry.

And yet, five years ago, when Dr. Victoria Tashjian from St. Norbert College was helping me to apply for Union to be certified by the Department of the Interior as an official stop on the Underground Railroad, one of the questions the application asked was about what our church has done in the realm of freedom and racial justice since. In short, what have we done lately? And so, while I acknowledge my trepidation in talking about slavery, I am also keenly aware of the importance of doing so. And, indeed, in a roundabout sort of way, hope that my treatment of our topic today will be impactful in areas of race and justice and human flourishing.

In today's reading, Paul talks about having two masters: having once been enslaved to sin and now, instead, being enslaved by God. You can already see some of the pitfalls of using slavery language; slaves do not choose their masters, and I fear that implying that they do somehow perpetuates the whitewashing of their experience. I hope that acknowledging this flaw in the image mitigates the damage that might cause.

Hear now, these words from the Letter to the Romans (6:15-23):

What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, slaves either to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented yourselves as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present yourselves as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. So what advantage did you then get from sin? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin

and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. For the wages of sin are death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

At the core of what Paul was trying to communicate is that even in our freedom we are beholden to a master. And THAT, my friends, is a message that I think is all too timely for this season of freedom, for our current context in our country. The contemporary language translation of the Bible called “The Message” puts it this way, “You know well enough from your own experience that there are some acts of so-called freedom that destroy freedom.” And so, as we celebrate freedom, my prayer leads me to encourage us all to contemplate what the responsibilities of freedom are, and how those responsibilities are informed by our faith.

Citizenship Informed by Faith

A couple of months ago, one of our members, Tim Dantoin, sent me a link to an interesting organization, Citizen University. As their name implies, they’re an organization dedicated to educating people on the issue of civic engagement. Citizenship equals power plus character.

Power. We all have it. Power is the ability to exert influence, to make things happen. Frankly, much of what ails our country right now stems from unbridled power, from freedom without a master. Eric Liu, the founder of Citizen University puts it pretty bluntly: “Here’s the thing about power: if all you have is power, but no moral compass, you’re just a highly skilled sociopath.”

That’s where our society is right now, highly powerful, without a moral compass. Now I know, talking about morality in civic life makes a lot of you itch, and rightly so. So much of what masquerades today as citizenship is actually people imposing their ideals on others. Really, what we’re experiencing in this country right now is a false binary: On the one hand, we’ve got the whole “I’m free to do what I want any old time,” and “You’re not the boss of me” crowd. On the other, we’ve got people trying to legislate everyone else into behaving according to their world view. Rather than the two extremes of freedom without responsibility or mandating compliance and uniformity, the folks at Citizen University suggest we re-imagine our civic responsibility to being “a sense of our interdependence and commitment to the common good”?

Conclusion

What’s more, critical to our mutual flourishing is inspiring the faith of others. The whole concept of money and the economy only works because people believe in it, otherwise that paper in your wallet and those numbers on your bank statement are mere fiction.

- Borders.
- Ownership.
- Democracy.

All of these only work because we believe in them. And so, my challenge to you as we wrap up the season of freedom this week, is to contemplate character. Think long and hard about what morality and ethics are critical to the flourishing of society. There are some cornerstones, like thou shalt not kill and thou shalt not steal. What are some others? That we have a responsibility to one another? That diversity is not only tolerated but celebrated?

Career diplomat Richard Haass recently wrote a book, “The Bill of Obligations.” His title, playing on the Bill of Rights, brings us back to our passage from Romans. We’re beholden to something. We are not our own. We have obligations.

Haass’ list is strong. The first is to “be informed.” He goes on to call for involvement. Citizenship doesn’t work by sitting on the sidelines, and so things like voting, educating others, volunteering, are ethics.

The next four obligations relate to compromise, civility, peace, and norms. To “stay open to compromise.” To “remain civil.” To “reject violence.”

His sixth ethic is something we could probably spend a whole season on: to “value norms” when they are right, even when not required by law. I would argue that this doesn’t mean “don’t let kids see someone in drag,” but it does mean “even if destroying the environment to line one’s pocket isn’t explicitly forbidden, it’s not good citizenship.”

Haass’ last four obligations concern collective responsibility: “Promote the common good” (even when it may conflict with their individual rights). “Respect government service.” “Support the teaching of civics.” And last, “put country first” over party, ideology, or personality.

Friends, being a good citizen is one of the fruits of our faith. I talk with you all of the time about the fact that one of Jesus’ core teachings was to encourage us to make this life more like the kingdom of God, not just for ourselves, but for others. Good citizenship should do that. My prayer as we wrap up this season of freedom is that you will use your freedom to serve that master.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Matthew 10:40-42; Romans 6:15-23 (the Message)
July 2, 2023