

# Growing Freedom: A Spirituality of Availability

June 14, 2026

Growing up, Flag Day was a big deal in my family. Part of that was geography. Waubeka, Wisconsin, a tiny, unincorporated town just west of where I grew up, is the birthplace of Flag Day. As a kid, I would ride my bike to the little one-room schoolhouse where, in 1885, a nineteen-year-old teacher named Bernard Cigrand placed a small American flag in the inkwell of his desk and asked his students to write about the ideals represented by that flag.

At our house, the flag hung proudly in front of the picture window. From the time I was old enough to climb a ladder, my dad would let me scramble up and hook it in place.

But the best part was always the parade. For an unincorporated berg, Waubeka brought it—bands, fire trucks, veterans, candy flying through the air, fireworks at night.

Those are warm memories. And because of those warm, idyllic memories, Flag Day has become a complicated experience for me as I've gotten older. Not because I love this country less. But because I love it differently.

As children, we are often taught to love our country by celebrating its achievements. As adults, hopefully, we learn to love it enough to tell the truth about it. And truth, like an auntie attending a family reunion, arrives this week bearing multiple gifts—both Flag Day and Juneteenth.

Flag Day and Juneteenth, sitting side by side on the calendar, create a kind of holy tension. One celebrates the symbols of freedom. The other remembers freedom denied. One invites us to remember our ideals. The other asks whether we have lived up to them.

And into that tension come our scripture readings. In Exodus, Moses and Aaron stand before Pharaoh with a simple demand, "Let my people go." It's one of the most famous lines in all of scripture. But Pharaoh's response is equally important. He doesn't just say no. He doubles the workload. He increases the suffering. He punishes people for even imagining another future. (Sound familiar?)

The Bible understands something that history confirms over and over again: those who benefit from injustice rarely surrender it voluntarily. Freedom is almost always resisted before it is realized.

That's true in Exodus. It's true in American history.

The Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863. Yet enslaved people in Texas would not learn of their freedom until June 19, 1865. Two and a half years. Freedom declared. Freedom delayed. And, to paraphrase both the Magna Carta and Martin Luther King, Jr., freedom delayed is freedom denied.

Juneteenth reminds us that announcing liberation and experiencing liberation are not the same thing. There is often a painful gap between the promise and the reality. The truth is, our nation

has always been remarkably good at proclaiming freedom. Practicing it has sometimes been harder.

- The flag flew over slavery.
- The flag flew over segregation.
- The flag flew while women were denied the vote.
- The flag flew while LGBTQ people were criminalized and condemned.

The flag itself cannot tell us whether we are living our values. Flags point toward ideals. People either embody those ideals or betray them.

Which brings us to Jesus. Matthew tells us that Jesus looked out upon the crowds and was moved with compassion. The Greek word used there is visceral. It means something like being stirred in the depths of your being. Jesus sees suffering and cannot remain detached from it. He sees people who are weary. People who are wounded. People who have been discarded. People who have been left behind.

And then he says, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” Notice what he does not say. He does not say, “They’re not my problem.” He does not say, “Someone else will handle it.” He does not say, “Let’s avoid controversy and keep everybody comfortable.” And he definitely doesn’t say, “They should have done things the right way.”

Instead, he calls ordinary people and sends them into the world. People who are imperfect. People who are uncertain. People who still have plenty of growing left to do. People like us.

This week I was on a Zoom with Rev. Traci Blackmon, the minister who was pastor of the UCC church in Ferguson, MO when Michael Brown was murdered and who would go on to numerous leadership roles in the denomination. She said something that lodged itself in my heart. “The call in this time is not to become perfect. It is to become available.”

Available.

That sounds like discipleship to me. Not having all the answers. Not being morally flawless. Not winning every argument. Simply being available to God. Available to compassion. Available to justice. Available to love. Available when God says, “There is healing that needs to happen.” Available when God says, “There is truth that needs to be spoken.” Available when God says, “There are people whose freedom is still unfinished.”

Because that’s what Jesus is doing in Matthew. He’s not recruiting spectators. He’s calling participants. There is a version of Christianity that treats faith as primarily private. A matter of personal beliefs and personal salvation. But Jesus seems remarkably interested in what happens to actual people living actual lives.

Hungry people. Poor people. Excluded people. People crushed by systems larger than themselves.

And when he sends the disciples, he gives them a mission: Cure the sick. Raise the dead. Cleanse the outcast. Cast out demons.

In other words, participate in God's healing of the world. Which is why Juneteenth belongs in church. Because freedom is a spiritual issue. Human dignity is a spiritual issue. Racism is a spiritual issue. Democracy is a spiritual issue. The flourishing of our neighbors is a spiritual issue.

As historian Jemar Tisby reminds us, Dr. King warned against a church more devoted to order than justice, more committed to comfort than truth. King distinguished between what he called a negative peace—the absence of tension—and a positive peace—the presence of justice. That's still a word we need. But God seems remarkably unwilling to settle for superficial peace when people are suffering.

Friends, following Jesus is not merely about becoming nicer people. As Ruth Haley Barton says: "Spiritual formation is the process of Christ being formed in us for the glory of God, for the abundance of our own lives, and for the sake of others."

For the sake of others. Not just inward transformation. Outward impact. Not just personal growth. Communal healing. Not just believing the right things. Becoming the kind of people through whom God's love can flow into the world.

So perhaps that's the question this week places before us. Not simply whether we love the flag. Not whether we can pledge allegiance to the nation's ideals. But whether we are willing to help make those ideals real. Whether we are becoming the kind of people who hear the cries God hears. Whether we are allowing divine compassion to flow through our voices and our actions. Whether we are helping close the gap between the promise and the reality.

And I think that's exactly what many of you have been trying to do. Since January, our Salt and Light Team has been engaged in a prayerful process of discernment around a simple but challenging question: What is Union Church called to do in support of the immigrants in our midst?

Notice the question isn't, "What political position should we take?" The question is, "What is God calling us to do?" Those are not always the same thing.

And so we've listened. We've learned. We've hosted educational forums. We've tried to better understand the experiences of our neighbors. We've wrestled with scripture. We've prayed.

And as immigration enforcement actions have impacted local families, many of you have responded in a way that feels deeply gospel-centered to me. You gathered food. Lots of food. You filled garages. You made sure children had something to eat. You helped families navigate frightening and uncertain circumstances.

Now, let's be honest. Nobody imagines that a bag of groceries fixes an unjust system. It doesn't.

But it does say to a frightened family: "You are not alone." It says: "We see you." It says: "Your suffering matters to us." And that sounds an awful lot like the compassion of Jesus in Matthew's gospel. Not solving every problem. But refusing to look away. Refusing to become numb. Refusing to let fear have the last word.

And this week, our Education Ministry launched another invitation into that same work through our congregation-wide Big Read of Robin DiAngelo's "Nice Racism." Now, some people hear a title like that and immediately become uncomfortable. Maybe that's not such a bad thing. Because growth rarely happens inside our comfort zones. Spiritual formation is not simply learning things that confirm what we already believe. Sometimes spiritual formation asks us to examine ourselves honestly. To ask difficult questions. To notice blind spots. To listen to experiences different from our own.

That's not an exercise in guilt. It's an exercise in discipleship. It's part of what it means to love our neighbors well. It's part of what it means to become available to God's ongoing work within us. After all, the goal is not perfection. The goal is growth. The goal is allowing Christ to be formed in us a little more deeply today than yesterday. The goal is becoming people whose love grows wider, whose compassion grows deeper, and whose commitment to justice grows stronger.

Friends, Juneteenth reminds us that freedom is never simply declared once and for all. Freedom must be practiced. It must be protected. It must be extended.

Each generation receives the unfinished work of freedom and decides what it will do with it. That is true for nations. And it is true for churches. The good news is that biblical hope is not optimism. Biblical hope is trusting God's future while standing inside an unfinished present. And the story of scripture is that God is not finished yet.

- Not with this nation.
- Not with this world.
- Not with this church.
- Not with any of us.

So let us pray daily. Speak truthfully. Serve faithfully. Love generously. Live simply. In short: let us allow ourselves to be available to God. Then let us go and join the harvest.

Amen.

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**Exodus 5:1-9 and Matthew 9:35-10:8 - OT 11A**  
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