

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 14, 2020
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Church of the Holy Cross

Freedom Is Not Enough

“Keep, O Lord, your household the Church in your steadfast faith and love, that through your grace we may proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion; for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.” *Amen.*

When I first hear the phrase “All Lives Matter” in response to “Black Lives Matter,” I remember thinking, it sounded more inclusive. Jesus came to save all people, not just the Jews, but in the Gospel today, Jesus sent out the disciples not to everyone, but first to the lost sheep of Israel. Why would Jesus do that? Jesus put the message of peace and love on the hearts of His own people first, knowing, hoping that because they had experienced freedom following oppression, they could embrace the love of one another. He knew they understood how the laws had been twisted. Jesus opened the door to salvation to the whole world. God does love everyone equally, but sometimes God calls to a specific group of people. This is Pride month, when we celebrate the LGBTQ+ community. As a member of that community, I would gladly set aside any celebration to stand with my black sisters and brothers, because right now, that is the community that needs the support and love of all of us. Yes, all lives matter, but if we are only about ourselves, we have missed the message Jesus brought to the world.

Right now, it is important to acknowledge that black lives are in danger. They have been historically, and they are to this day. This is about helping the ones who are hurting the most. If a house on your street was on fire, would you expect the fire service to arrive and train their hoses on all the houses? Of course not. While they would, rightly, argue that all homes matter, in that very moment they will focus their attention and expertise on the house that’s burning down. And so it is with Black Lives Matter. No one is saying, “ONLY black lives matter”. No one is saying, “black lives matter more.” Black people are dying at the hands of some out-of-control people at a high rate.

Freedom is not enough. Juneteenth¹ is upon us. In Texas on June 19, 1865, the last confederate state publicly announced the emancipation proclamation that had been issued more than two years earlier, on January 1, 1863. Freedom had come to all of the slaves. This was good news! “Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, I am free at last.”² That was 155 years ago. Black people have had 155 years to make a life here in the United States and they have not done a very good job, if we measure by the rates of poverty, poor health, educational levels. The phrase all lives matter is a view that ignores systemic racism, and the century it took to start putting laws in place to level the playing field. Of course, all lives matter, but people do not treat each other as equals, and all lives have not been given the same opportunities to grow, learn, build wealth and thrive.

I want you to take a few deep breaths and clear your mind. Put yourself back in slave territory in the mid 1860s. No money, property, food, shelter or anything that you can call your own, unless it was given to you by your former owner. Also, think about those owners who lost their workforces. Think about how slave owners got where they were. Their mostly European roots, gave them 19 centuries to develop wealth, laws, and norms. Not 155 years, 19 centuries. Many slaves took what they could get—jobs from their former owners, who then charged them for food and shelter to the point where they were working for free just to stay alive. Proclaiming their freedom was not enough, because they weren’t actually free.

Let’s look at a modern-day example of how difficult it was to be freed in the 1860s.

Over 10,000 ex-prisoners are released from America’s state and federal prisons every week and arrive on the doorsteps of our nation’s communities. Studies show that approximately two thirds will likely be

rearrested within three years of release. The communities to which most former prisoners return are often impoverished and disenfranchised neighborhoods with few social supports and persistently high crime rates. And, the release of ex-offenders presents a variety of challenges.

What can be done to help these ex-prisoners keep from being rearrested? With no job, no money, and no place to live, returnees often find themselves facing the same pressures and temptations that landed them in prison in the first place.³

Jesus said that the harvest was plentiful. When I look at the crowds of protestors crying for justice, I realize they are the harvest, and we are the laborers. I need to do all I can for those who are hurting. My efforts may not be perfect, but I have to try. I am not perfect, I make mistakes. When my day comes, I know that I am saved. I know I will not be judged on what I have done or left undone. But I will be convicted if I knew that my sisters and brothers were hurting, and I stood by and did nothing.

Freedom is not enough. We need solidarity among all people. We need to level the playing field. We need to call out injustice, and Jesus told us that following Him would cause us hardship, but it is what we need to do. If we are following Jesus, we must be social-justice minded. When we say we cannot stand up for those hurting, it is our privilege speaking. We need to acknowledge the struggle of every person who does not share our same freedoms and advantages—all of them.

Jesus started with the Israelites, but he opened the doors to everyone. We live in a world where the door was once opened for us. We should not lock the door behind us to any other group. We are called to not just open the door, but to welcome and show hospitality. We are to let the world know that God loves everyone, no exceptions. As Paul says, "...we are justified by faith, we have peace with God..." We can acknowledge and show hospitality to everyone. We can tell the world that all are welcome here just as they are, in ways that make them feel safe and comforted, knowing that we have their backs. *Hopelessness is the enemy of justice.*⁴ If all we can do is give hope, it is doing something, it is doing what Jesus would do.

We have an opportunity to learn how we arrived at the point where oppressing black people cannot be ignored. *We have been asked to do things that seem unnatural by wearing masks, and physical distancing. We are asked to dig deep and examine ourselves in regards to racism and white privilege and what it means. All of this can cause significant disruption to our peace of mind and safety. You may not feel "afraid", but your mind and body may be expressing itself through anger and defensiveness. If this is the case for you, know that it is ok to be angry. It is not ok to harm another with how we choose to express that anger. Give yourself grace. You are human. I am human. Humans have emotions. When we're angry, we're more likely to be defensive. When we're defensive, we're less likely to be able to listen and/or learn. We need to understand that we are all one race, the human race.*

We don't have to look far to see that so many of our brothers and sisters are in trouble, to see a system that is rigged against an entire group of people, or see the oppression and the cruelty perpetrated on these people by those in power. And Jesus is telling us to go to our brothers and sisters, and take care of their needs; bind their wounds; soothe their hearts; and fight to remove the oppression and the fear that they live with every single day. That is the mission Jesus is sending us on. We have been given our marching orders, like it or not. We are expected to go out into the world and proclaim the good news that the kingdom of God has come near!

The psalmist says, "...come before his presence with a song." The playlist of songs on my heart are, "We shall overcome," "Ella's Song," or We Who Believe in Freedom Shall Not Rest, and my personal favorite, "I Will Survive" because, "As long as I know how to love, I know I'll stay alive" and love gives me hope.

Freedom is not enough. We need solidarity. Right now, I believe that God is working through the black community to raise us all up, because we are one human race, united through Christ. Listen, and then

answer that call. Give without payment -- being transactional in business is expected, in relationships it is soul shattering. If anyone does not welcome our message of love and inclusion, dust off your feet, and move on to reach those who can hear and heed God's call to love one another as Jesus loved us. If you do this, God's peace will return to you. Amen

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Exodus 19:2-8a; Psalm 100; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Juneteenth>

² The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

³ https://www.justice.gov/archive/fbci/progmenu_reentry.html

⁴ Quote from the movie "Just Mercy"

- I have my friend Lois Thompson to thank for putting the house fire meme we have seen on Facebook into words. And other words I have gleaned from her writing.
- I also thank The Rev. Liz Tomlinson for her grace as we walk with each other in our sermon preparation – her words are on my heart and also in this sermon.