

“What Must We Do?”

June 19, 2022

Acts 16:16-34

Our complex history as a nation includes captors and captives, liberators and the liberated, oppressors and those who rise up against oppression.

How did we come to this day, these times as Americans and as people of faith?

And having come this far, what must we do?

This morning we heard a story of slavery and freedom whose light shines on our path.

It starts with an enslaved girl. She has no name—at least no name that is remembered as important. She has no occupation of her own—she does the bidding of those who *own* her. Her value seems to be only in profit that her owners get from her.

How do we describe what is happening?

Abuse.

Exploitation.

The marring of the very image of God in a human being.

The thing is, this girl speaks the truth—and with some persistence. For several days she follows Paul and his companions shouting: “These people are the servants of the Most High God.” The word we translate as “servants” can also mean “slaves.” So here is an enslaved girl, trapped by the greed of those who own her, suggesting that these apparently free people are “slaves.”

And we wonder: Will these “slaves of the Most High God” do anything for this girl?

No.

In spite of her shouting, she is ignored.

Day after day.

We might ask why this story was remembered and recorded in what Christians would come to regard as sacred scripture. This is not an inspiring story.

But then, scripture was not written that we might be inspired. Scripture was written that we might find life—and live a life that matters.

This is a disturbing story of justice delayed, a story of compassion withheld.

In a speech in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass called the church to account saying, “The American church is guilty, when viewed in connection with what it is doing to *uphold* slavery; but it is superlatively guilty when viewed in its connection with its ability to *abolish* slavery.” He quoted the Presbyterian theologian, Albert Barnes, who said,

“There is no power *out* of the church that could sustain slavery an hour, if it were not sustained *in* it.”

Douglass issued this challenge: “Let the religious press, the pulpit, the Sunday School, the conference meeting, the great ecclesiastical, missionary, Bible and tract associations of the land array their immense powers against slavery, and slave-holding; and the whole system of crime and blood would be scattered to the winds, and that they do not do this involves them in the most awful responsibility of which the mind can conceive.”

Within a decade the nation was in the middle of a great Civil War. On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. African Americans began to enlist in the Union Army, fulfilling the hope of Douglass, who had been pressuring Lincoln to allow their service. The war turned from an effort to preserve the Union into a moral crusade to eliminate the enslavement of people in the United States.

Not so much out of compassion as annoyance, Paul speaks: “Come out of her—in the name of Jesus Christ!”

And the owners of this now “unprofitable” girl take Paul before the magistrates.

They appeal to a desire for order: “These men are causing a disturbance.”

They appeal to the way things are and should be: “They are advocating practices that we cannot accept.”

They appeal to nationalism and anti-Semitism: “These men are Jews.”

They appeal to all the reasons one might find to hate and despise and punish.

There are consequences when people seek to be faithful. We struggle, Paul says, against principalities and powers. And those powers will not be defeated without a great struggle.

Of the 73,000 Iowans who served in the Union Army, 13,000 died. In some sense, we have all come to this day “treading our feet,” as we sang, “through the blood of the slaughtered.”

“Find the cost of freedom,” the song said. The cost is high and is paid again and again.

On April 9, 1865, the war ended. The combined forces of abolitionists in churches and the Union Army *did* scatter the whole slavery system of “crime and blood” to the winds.

It wasn’t until June 19 of that year, however, that news of the end of the war and of the end of slavery reached Texas. In Galveston on this day, Major General Gordon Granger issued “General Order, Number 3,” stating: “The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equity of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves...”

Astonishing words: “absolute equity of personal rights.” The system was destroyed, leaving only *former* masters and slaves, a radical change that sought to make real the revolutionary affirmation that *all* people are created equal. A radical change that offered the opportunity—if people of faith would take it—to honor the image of God in all people.

Henry Louis Gates reminds us that “when Texas fell and Granger issued his order, it wasn’t exactly instant magic for most of the Lone Star State’s 250,000 slaves. On plantations, masters had to decide when and how to announce the news — or wait for a government agent to arrive — and it was not uncommon for them to delay until after the harvest. Even in Galveston, the ex-Confederate mayor flouted the Army by forcing the freed people back to work.”

Independence, freedom, equality come slowly, with struggle, with opposition.

A federal holiday as of last year, Juneteenth is a part of our larger story as one nation with a difficult past and an often-troubled present, striving to move toward a more perfect union.

The God that we encounter in scripture is the God who sets prisoners free, who releases the captives.

If this is not our reality, it is at certainly our prayer. A Christian from Namibia prayed in this way:

Lord, break the chains of humiliation and death,
just as on that glorious morning
when you were raised.

Let those who weep as they sow the seeds of justice and freedom,
gather the harvest of peace and reconciliation.ⁱ

We pray like this because of the resurrection promise that new life is at hand, that freedom is near.

In faith we affirm that God’s power to set free is far greater than the human ability to imprison and enslave.

But that’s not always good news for everyone—at least not at first.

When the earthquake sets Paul and his companions free, the jailer draws his sword and prepares to kill himself. Death, after all, will be his reward for losing all those prisoners. But when the word comes that everyone is still there, the jailer falls down and asks: “What must I do to be saved?”

Stay with this for a few minutes.

Novelist Frederick Buechener says that in the experience of salvation two things happen: you lose yourself, and you find that you are more fully yourself than usual.”ⁱⁱ

Paul’s answer is disturbingly direct—Believe. “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your whole household.”

Protestants have long claimed that there's nothing we can “do,” really, to be saved. Neither attending church nor staying away from church, neither saving a lot of money nor giving away a lot of money, neither being good middle-class Americans nor being good rebels with or without a cause will do it.

Believe. That's it. Commit yourself to the One whose life was about freedom, whose resurrection was about life.

Believing is not something we do alone or in private. We worship together. We pray together. We feed the hungry, we resist, we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God together. That is why you are here this morning. And if you are joining us online, it is out of that desire to be connected to this larger community, even if at a distance—because you sense that going it on your own won't work, that you need those around you as much as they need you.

This is why Paul encouraged the jailer to be baptized and become a part of that small group of Christians in Philippi. This is why we continue to invite and welcome all kinds of people into our common life of faith—that together we might all find the wholeness, the salvation that we seek.

The God who breaks chains and sets free, who shakes the foundations of the earth can surely give each one of us the life for which we were created. The God who raised Jesus from death will surely give us life.

Reflecting on the delayed announcement of the end of the Civil War and of Granger's General Order, Henry Louis Gates says it was "hardly the recipe for a celebration." Still, he adds, rejoicing over deliverance and freedom could not be suppressed. "Defying confusion and delay, terror and violence, the newly 'freed' black men and women of Texas...now had a date to rally around. In one of the most inspiring grassroots efforts of the post-Civil War period, they transformed June 19 from a day of unheeded military orders into their own annual rite, 'Juneteenth' beginning one year later in 1866."ⁱⁱⁱ

Independence, freedom, equality come far too slowly, with great struggle and opposition. But when they come, everyone should celebrate--together.

We should all give thanks to God when people are delivered from oppression.

We should mark those occasions in the life of our nation that make all of us better off, celebrating the freedom we have, moving toward greater freedom for all.

When good news comes to us, we celebrate and give thanks.

When good news comes to others, we join with them in celebration and thanksgiving. The deliverance of God in all times, in all places, for all people calls forth our rejoicing.

Yes, there is still, as Martin Luther King, Jr. told us nearly 60 years ago, a great promissory note that has not been paid. Even so, all people can celebrate, remembering and giving thanks for that day when good news arrived to the oppressed and release was proclaimed to the captive.

What must we do?

Lincoln's words in the middle of the Civil War continue to inform our actions: We are to be dedicated to the unfinished work—for there is much that is remains to be done.

We are to be dedicated to the great task remaining before us—and that task is great, indeed, the are *many* great tasks facing us today.

These are days in which many fear that government of the people, by the people, and for the people might perish from the earth—or at least from our nation. Let us in these days work toward the reconciliation of people, let us seek understanding and the common good. Let us strengthen our democracy by encouraging and facilitating the simple yet profound act of voting.

There is much to do.

There is much to celebrate.

Let us celebrate.

Let us act.

^{i.} Zephania Kameeta, in *Bearing Our Sorrows*, pg. 175.

^{ii.} Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, pg. 83-84.

ⁱⁱⁱ Henry Louis Gates, “What Is Juneteenth,” [What Is Juneteenth? African American History Blog | The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross \(pbs.org\)](https://www.pbs.org/what-is-juneteenth/)