

“The Use of Freedom”  
June 28, 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4  
II Corinthians 3:17-18

So where are we at this morning?

The Covid-19 pandemic continues and leaders at the national and state level seem to have given up on even trying to deal with it. And here’s something: a new Washington Post poll found 31 percent of black adults said they knew someone who had died from Covid-19, compared with 9 percent who were white.

The economic upheaval caused by the pandemic continues as a “reopened” economy faces closing once more in many places. Minorities and people with low incomes, as always, have been hurt the most.

At the same time, the scales are falling from the eyes of many and hardened hearts are changing as more white people recognize the injustices born by African-Americans on a daily basis.

None of the challenges we face are going away anytime soon. How will we respond?

The opportunities that are presenting themselves to us as individuals, as a church, and as a nation will be with us for some time as well. How will we use them in positive ways?

We stand this morning between Juneteenth and the Fourth of July—two celebrations of freedom, one largely ignored by white people, the other a national holiday long observed. So let us, in this in-between time, explore how we might use freedom to move our nation and ourselves toward the more perfect union that we desire.

Let’s begin with the problem of Independence Day.

In a speech in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass famously asked: “What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy—a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.”

As we continue to hear reports of new incidents of police violence and racism, one feels that final sentence could have been written last week.

Douglass called the church into 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,” and 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.”

And one wonders, what might happen today if “the religious press, the pulpit, the Sunday School, the conference meeting, the great ecclesiastical, missionary, Bible and tract associations of the land array[ed] their immense powers” against racist violence and toward racial and economic justice?

When the Civil War ended, it wasn’t until June 19, 1865—thirteen years after Douglass’s chastising speech, that the abolition of slavery was announced in Texas. Juneteenth marks that announcement and more generally the end of slavery in the Confederate South. Of course, it wasn’t until the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified on Dec. 18, 1865, that slavery was abolished in Kentucky and Delaware—slave states that had not left the Union and therefore weren’t covered by the Emancipation Proclamation.

Independence, freedom, equality come with struggle, with opposition. People fought a Civil War, marched for women’s suffrage, faced jail and injustice and violence and murder, debated and voted and petitioned and protested out of the faith that is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

We should be marking those dual occasions in the life of our nation that have made all of us better off, celebrating the freedom we have, moving toward greater freedom for all. Yes, so many are still on the stony road—and we must look closely at what is required of us that we might continue walking under the guidance of the vision of freedom.

Indeed, the hope of our nation is found only as we face our current reality.

And this is where Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians helps us.

Listen to those words again: “The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

One New Testament scholar tells us that this verse is “one of the most debated sentences in scripture.” So we’re already in difficult territory—and we’re just starting.

In this context, “the Lord,” here means “God”—in particular the God who was made known to Moses. But Paul also uses the word “Lord” to mean Jesus Christ. And as Paul sees it, those who turn to the Lord, that is, to Christ, discover a new, life-giving freedom and boldness, that comes from God who is the Spirit.

Paul teasing out an important aspect of the Christian faith: the freedom that we have as we live our lives; the freedom that we have as we seek to serve God. We are not held captive to the past but are set free to explore new ways of faith and action.

The gift of freedom is the ability to choose and shape a new future.

Such freedom is central to the good news that Jesus announced. As the Gospel of Luke tells it, at the beginning of his public ministry Jesus read to the people from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah the same words that we heard this morning: “God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.”

This hope of the Jewish people was fulfilled in their return from exile in Babylon. They were set free from captivity, they were released so that they could return home to rebuild, repair, and restore their nation and its cities. Freedom came with a purpose.

Even today we today seek the freedom that is known in Christ.

How do we express this?

We say that we are set free from sin—that is from all that would separate us from God, from one another, and even from the best in ourselves. We say that we are set free to love one another without the restraints of fear and caution that we impose on ourselves. We say that we are set free to seek the good even when we are confronted by evil.

The stories of Jesus tell of other freedoms as well—freedom from disease, from disability, from brokenness of mind and spirit. In all those gospel stories of healing—in spite of the troubling issues that they raise for us—in all those stories we get the sense that in drawing near to Jesus people were restored to the lives for which they were made. We get the sense that our own lives, too, might be set free from all that restricts us, that we might become the people we long to be.

And as such people, in freedom, we might create the society that we long to see.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Those are empowering words—inviting us to receive the new freedom, the new life that comes to us in Christ.

This freedom grows out of a deep sense that, as Paul puts it, we see “the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror.” None of us has all of the truth. None of us has seen God. We have at best a mirror image—a reversed image, a fuzzy picture.

In our congregation and in our own lives we are set free to test limits, to move in directions not defined by the past. We can question old ways and try new paths. We find freedom to seek the good, a freedom that, if it is limited, it is limited only by our love for God and our love for one another.

Where the Spirit of God is, we discover this freedom—to love one another as we have been loved, to set aside the quarrels and dissensions and factions that have become endemic in our common life and to choose instead the way of kindness, generosity, and faithfulness.

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, we stand this morning between Juneteenth and the Fourth of July—two celebrations of freedom, one largely ignored by white people, the other a national holiday.

Like many others, the singer, Usher, recently wrote that Juneteenth should be a national holiday, observed by all Americans. I agree with that. We need to celebrate with great enthusiasm those moments when freedom rings so that it might echo ever louder.

Usher added that “Rather than observing Juneteenth as we do other holidays, by taking it off, we can make it a day when black culture, black entrepreneurship and black business get our support. A national Juneteenth observance can affirm that Black Lives Matter!”<sup>1</sup>

The Rev. William Barber II, pushes this, saying: “Some are calling for Juneteenth to be a national holiday. How about we go further and pass healthcare and living wages for all, a fully restored Voting Rights Act and reparations, etc. Please,” he says, “don’t just ask for a holiday. Let’s make it a holy day of repentance & reconstruction.”

“How about we go further?”

There is still so much work to be done. Much of it is not flashy or attention grabbing. It is getting out the vote. It is doing the hard work of policy making. It is recovering the almost forgotten art of political compromise that moves policies forward and continues to get closer to the justice we desire, closer to honoring the image of God in each person.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. We must nurture and defend that freedom among ourselves and for all people. In this way we continue the work begun in Christ: bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, comforting those who mourn, proclaiming liberty to the captives and the year of God’s favor.

So let us, from this day forward, use our freedom to move our nation and ourselves toward the more perfect union that we desire.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/18/usher-its-past-time-make-juneteenth-national-holiday/>