

4 February 2024, 5 Epiphany B
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Isaiah 40:21-31
1 Corinthians 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39
Psalm 147:1-12, 21c

Love and Liberation

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Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. **Amen.**

There is a remarkable alignment between the beginning of Black History Month and our readings today. Running throughout the Collect of the Day and the Lectionary readings are the themes of bondage and freedom, both in relation to sin. At the same time, literal bondage and freedom are unavoidable key theme that runs through the experience of Black people (as well as Indigenous people and other people of color) in America.

We cannot consider Black history without confronting the capture of Africans; their being transported like cargo in deadly and atrocious conditions; their being sold like livestock; the theft of their labor; their torture; and the stripping of their dignity.

Nor can we proclaim that the enslavement of Black people is bygone. Its affects ripple to our time. New ways of enslavement have arisen. BIPOC folks – Black, Indigenous, and People of Color – are prosecuted and imprisoned at rates far higher than white people. BIPOC folks suffer from unequal access to education, health care, and other resources. BIPOC individuals are striped of agency over their bodies and their lives are treated as expendable. The condition and treatment of BIPOC folks today are ripples from the past, from the theft of property from and extermination of Indigenous people, from the enslavement of Black people, from the ability to look at our fellow human beings, those who bear the image of God, as subhuman.

Let's go back to October and November of 1862. Here is one statement concerning slavery in America:

The time has come when the Church should press more urgently . . . upon her laity, the solemn fact, that the slaves of the South are not merely so much property, but are a sacred trust committed to us, as a people, to be prepared for the work which God may have for them to do, in the future. While under this tutelage He freely gives to us their labor, but expects us to give back to them [] religious and moral instruction If subjected to the teachings of a bald spiritualism, they will find food for their senses and their child-like fancies in superstitious observances of their own, leading too often to crime and licentiousness.

. . . Hitherto have we been hindered by the pressure of abolitionism; now that we have thrown off from us that hateful and infidel pestilence, we should prove to the world that we are faithful to our trust and the Church should lead the hosts of the Lord in this work of justice and of mercy.

That is an excerpt from the pastoral letter from the Confederate Episcopal Church's Southern bishops to the clergy and laity in the South. During the Civil War, the Episcopal Church temporarily split, but this wasn't theological. When the Southern states seceded, communication between the Southern and Northern dioceses of the Episcopal Church became much more difficult. Plus, the Southern dioceses of the Church felt a sense of duty to stand by the Confederate states' governments. So, there came into being the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States of America.

What, if anything, did the Northern bishops say? They, too, wrote a pastoral letter in which they lament, not the existence of slavery, but the division in the Church brought about by rebellion. The Northern bishops take issue with the Southern states' having rebelled against the government because the Bible says governments are instituted by God. Referring to the Great Litany, they write, "Ever since our Church had her Litany, we have been praying for deliverance 'from sedition, privy conspiracy, and rebellion.' And now that all the three are upon us, and in a depth of scheme, a force of action, a strength of purpose, and an extensiveness of sway such as the world never before saw united for the dismemberment of any government, shall we refuse to tell you in what light we regard that gigantic evil?" The gigantic evil is not slavery. It's rebellion.

What did they say about slavery? Nothing. The words “slavery” and “slave” aren’t in there. The Northern bishops are, instead, nostalgic for the unity that preceded secession and war. But they ignored an important reality. While the first Black Episcopal church independent from white control opened in 1794 and Absalom Jones was ordained a priest in 1802, the reality was that Black Episcopalians were separate from the rest of the Church, and they certainly did not receive diocesan resources or national Church support. Even the unity for which the Northern bishops so yearned was a fiction. Black people had no place in that unity.

What does any of this have to do with the readings? Certainly, the themes of bondage and freedom run through today’s reading, but the reading from Mark caused me to think about this differently.

Today’s passage begins with the healing of a fever, and healing is sprinkled throughout. In Jesus’ time, illness, even minor illness, was a big deal. There wasn’t much you could do and even something we would consider common, like a fever, could result in death.

Add to that that illness and disability were often seen as the result of sin and/or malevolent forces. This meant that experiencing chronic illness, disability, or demonic possession resulted in being ostracized from society. We hear these stories in the Gospels. Lepers are pushed to the literal fringes of society; blind and deaf individuals are shunned; and those experiencing demonic possession are chained and forced to live in the tombs. Conditions like leprosy, disability, and demonic possession resulted in a societally imposed bondage. “Those people” are no longer part of us. They are other. Jesus’ healing alleviated not just physical afflictions, but it also restored those experiencing illness and disability to union with society. They could rejoin the community. It’s no wonder that “the whole city was gathered around the door” or that, when Jesus goes off alone to pray, everyone was searching for him.

This passage from Mark is about Jesus healing, but when he is told that everyone is searching for him, his response, presumably informed by his time in prayer, is perplexing: “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for this is what I came out to do.” He doesn’t say, “so that I may cure the sick and cast out demons there also.” He says, “so that I may proclaim the message there also.”

We know that message. It’s the Gospel message that God is near and the reminder to love God, love ourselves, and love one another. What does

that have to do with healing? Everything because the concluding verse in today's reading is that Jesus went throughout Galilee "proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons."

The Gospel message and Jesus' acts of healing are members one of another. Jesus' healing of others frees them from social bondage and restores them to the community. The Gospel message, the Good News, is, likewise, freedom: freedom from sin, freedom from everything that interferes with our loving God, loving ourselves, and loving one another. As Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, "If it's not about love, it's not about God." Jesus' ministry – both his message and the acts of healing he performs because of that message – is, at its core, about love and loves freeing power. Love causes him to touch the untouchables of society and make them whole. Love causes him to tend to the needs of others despite the likely frustration of being trailed all over Judea.

The Gospel, as our collect and readings today highlight, is very much about liberation from bondage to sin, but perhaps our view of this is too narrow. This all too narrow view caused both the Southern and the Northern bishops to go astray in their pastoral letters.

I think we pretty much universally agree today that slavery is sinful. Enslavement puts people in literal bondage, and the Gospel demands freedom from that bondage. But the sin of slavery, and sin in general, places more than the oppressed in bondage.

The white Southern bishops, regardless of whether they participated in the enslavement of Black people, were nonetheless in bondage to sin. They put defending slavery before God. In their pastoral letter, they force the Gospel into the institution of slavery like overstuffing a suitcase. They didn't stop to question whether slavery was consonant with the Gospel. They made the Gospel a slave to slavery.

The Northern bishops didn't get this right either. They focused on their fictionalized pre-war ideal of the Episcopal Church at union with itself. They ignored that the union they sought to return to thrived because it was a union of white men with everyone else pushed to the fringes. Like the Southern bishops, the Northern bishops did not go back to the Gospel and examine what it calls for. They sidestepped the key issue – the enslavement of people – for the neater, more comfortable, rainbows-and-unicorns issue of unity.

On the issue of slavery, the Southern and Northern bishops bound themselves to something other than God and the Gospel. They bound themselves to defending or ignoring a sinful institution. They bound themselves to a unity made possible by the exclusion and subjugation of others. They led with a narrow love that extended only to a small group instead of the universal, unconditional, no excuses love of God, self, and neighbor that the Gospel requires. They placed themselves in bondage to something other than God and love.

But the Gospel is about freedom because the Gospel is about love. The Gospel is about casting out everything that seeks to interfere with our loving God and each other. The Gospel is about freeing us to see God in everyone and everything, about freeing us to love broad and hard. This is, indeed, freedom. The Gospel tells us that, even when sin seems to benefit us, even when sin seems to be the easier road, even when it appears only others' freedom is impacted, we are in fact taking freedom from ourselves.

We cannot proclaim the Gospel without proclaiming freedom for all people. We cannot proclaim the Gospel without being anti-racist. We cannot proclaim the Gospel without working to heal the wrongs of the past. We cannot proclaim the Gospel without advocating for justice and peace among all people. We cannot proclaim the Gospel without respecting the dignity of every human being. We cannot proclaim the Gospel without love. Love is the source of God's grace to us. Love is freedom.

Let us pray.

Set us free, O God, from the bondage of sin, and give us the liberty of that abundant life and love which you have made known to us in your Son our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns in love and freedom with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.