

Spotlight on the early church: There is Freedom!
2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17
A sermon preached at Plymouth Presbyterian Church,
St. Helens, Oregon on June 16, 2024
By Rev. Peter J. Blank H.R.

Our focus text are verses 2 Cor. 16 & 17: “¹⁶From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we no longer know him in that way. ¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; look, new things have come into being!”

This is Juneteenth Sunday within Pride month. We have been raising up issues of how we can support the LGBTQIA+ community. Today we focus on how we can support African American brothers and sisters.

About Juneteenth—I had no idea. Growing up in Ukiah, California, I simply had no idea that there was a day dedicated to celebrating the day when slaves were truly freed—not by official proclamation as customarily taught, but by an enforced reality. It took soldiers to enforce the law. Despite the importance of Juneteenth as a state holiday in Texas and observed officially in another 44 states, but not all states. I was surprised. And imagine my learning that a full two years after Lincoln’s Proclamation, those Texas slaves had yet to be declared they were truly free.

My surprise is due to my assumption that the historical narrative that was taught to me as a child was the only primary narrative that there was. As with so many things in adulthood, my education was incomplete. I am not alone.

Where and when has the narrative which you were taught been incomplete? If we are to be honest, many of us likely had incomplete narratives, whatever our race, our gender, our class, or our religion. Part of mature faith is learning when and how the spiritual, religious, and social narrative that we learned as children or even as adults has been incomplete or lacking in some way. Truth can stand questioning. It can also withstand competing or multiple narratives being told and experienced.

So I am not surprised, really, that I had no idea about Juneteenth – a slave narrative.

Our bible is rich in slave narratives. At various times in history, that slave narrative has been used to justify chattel slavery and unhealthy power-dynamics between various tribes, races, and peoples. However, our bible is also rich in narratives of liberation which is one reason why many slave owners forbid slaves going to church or the resident slave preacher preaching anything other than obedience to the master of the plantation lest the slaves rebel. Within its complex narratives, the Bible explores the dynamics of relationship and freedom, containing powerful stories of God’s leaders and liberators— Moses, Jesus, and yes, Mary were liberators to those enslaved by powers and principalities that would bind and oppress the human spirit and human heart.

Our Hebrew and Christian forebears thought it important to teach their children about God’s presence, power, and action even in the midst of enslavement while helping those enslaved to tap into God’s Spirit to encourage their own disheartened spirits and to empower them. Enslavement is a hard word these days to discuss in mixed groups. For many people, enslavement is something to leave behind, an idea that belongs only to the sad dust of the

past. For these, the slavery issue was settled long ago, at least in certain overt forms. Yet, depending on who you talk to, slavery is alive and well in the human heart.

I did not know of Frederick Douglas 'experience:

I am not included within the pale of this glorious [July 4th] anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine.

- Fredrick Douglass on July 4th

Now that I know, I have to do something.

There is a scene in Tom Hanks' movie, Forrest Gump, that came to mind when I read this text in 1 Corinthians. As a young boy, Forrest has to wear these clumsy, heavy leg braces. For the most part, he doesn't care. In fact, the braces become so much a part of his life that he doesn't even realize much how they have trapped and confined him.

And then one day, some bullies chase Forrest and he has to run away but the braces slow him down. As the bullies get closer and closer and Forrest struggles to run faster, the braces finally break, fall off his legs, and suddenly he is set free to run fast.

The point is this, Forrest never knew what it felt to be free or how fast he could run until he took that step or, in a better sense, was forced to break out of braces, and live differently, to live beyond himself. He never went back to the braces.

It's time we broke the braces we've been living with.

Like Forest, there is no going back. At the front of the sanctuary, we've added three new candles to the rainbow of colored candles: black, brown and white. We light these because there's work to be done in race relations. Let me return to our focus passage: *"If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"*

One thing that has hit me squarely in the face this Juneteenth is the role violence has played in our nation's history and in the human heart. The violent response to a peaceful march using batons, water cannons and police dogs on the Pettis bridge. The death of George Floyd and Brianna Taylor. Shootings in schools, shootings in Gay night clubs, and shootings in churches and synagogues, tell me we have a problem with violence.

As Derek Flood, author of *Healing the Gospel: A Radical Vision for Grace, Justice and the Cross* writes, "When all you have is a hammer, everything starts to look like a nail...Violence is most dangerous when it masquerades as good. In the past people sought to justify violence against children, claiming it was 'for their own good.' Today we hear the argument from law enforcement that their use of violence is for our own protection. However, as we are increasingly seeing, the actual result is that we are all less safe. Violence has long been our country's national savior. It's time we recognized it for the empty idol that it really is. It's time we found better ways of dealing with our problems. Rather than finding reasons to justify violence, we need to be looking for better and more effective means for addressing problems. We have lots of hammers. It's time we learned to use the many other tools at our disposal." (Derek Flood, "Ferguson and America's Love Affair With Violence," HuffPost, updated October 25, 2014.)

As New Creations empowered by the love of Christ, we're called to walk by faith and not by sight; to live for Christ and not for ourselves and to regard no one from a human point of view but see them from God's point of view. There is freedom!

In Max Lucado's words, "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If God had a wallet, your photo would be in it. God sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning...Face it, friend. God is crazy about you!" If you understand the truth in those words, know that what God wants of you is simply for you to go out and spread that same love to everyone you encounter.

On this Juneteenth, we can do something and move toward freedom

1. **Respectfully attend or volunteer at Juneteenth events.** Ask your local sponsor of Juneteenth events and your Black friends, colleagues, and church friends how you can help. Do not wear African dashikis or kente cloth without first asking permission. While you may intend it as appreciation, others may view it as cultural appropriation.
2. **Preach and teach about the current face of racism.** Many white people have been socialized to see racism as a challenge of the distant past. The U.S. Church is still largely segregated in worship and work. White Christians must grapple with their role in perpetrating racism and work to heed God's call to "let justice roll down."
3. **Support Black churches, charities, and businesses.** Make a regular donations to a local African American church. Make deliberate efforts to support Black-owned businesses and services.
4. **Listen and read.** Juneteenth offers an opportunity for white friends and family to learn more about the realities African-Americans face and the contributions they make to the church, community, and world.
5. **Confront the history in your community.** Learn about the history of enslaved Black people in your local area and state.
6. **Church school and small groups:** Discuss Juneteenth's history and current implications for African Americans.

As New Creations empowered by the love of Christ, we are called to walk by faith and not by sight; to live for Christ and not for ourselves and to regard no one from a human point of view but see them from God's point of view. Today we light candles for people of color, for violence to end. We live for freedom!