



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JUNE 19, 2022
1 KINGS 19:1-15; PSALM 42-43; GALATIANS 3:23-29; LUKE 8:26-39

THE WHOLE STORY



Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, 6th century.

Luke 8:26-39 [Jesus and his disciples arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me" -- for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss. Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country. Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for

they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned. The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.]

This week, I spent some time praying with art that depicts today's gospel story called "The Healing of the Gerasene Demoniac." There are centuries of images that tell the story of the naked, captive man who lives among the dead, rejected by his community; and how Jesus casts out his tormentors and restores him to health.

Many of the pieces show the moment of healing as the man's chained body jerks backwards and ugly, winged creatures spew out of his mouth. One 6th C mosaic, though, shows the aftermath of the healing, with the man kneeling at Jesus' feet, arms stretched out in gratitude. Jesus extends his hand to him, with a slight smile on his face. Next to Jesus is another person, probably a disciple but maybe a Gerasene, who also extends a blessing to the newly healed man.

The core of the story is Jesus' desire for the man's healing, despite the man's insistence his known misery is preferable to Jesus' offer of unimaginable freedom. But that's not the whole story.

There's more happening with the broader community of guards and swineherds and townspeople, some of whom witness what happens and others who hear about it secondhand. These are the people who have lived alongside the demonized man for years – the ones who secure his chains, pay his captors, and watch from the hillside as he suffers alone.

You might think that at least one person would rejoice that the man is made whole, but no. "All the people of the surrounding country" are angry and afraid and insist that Jesus leave town. It seems the healing is not good news for

them. Beyond the loss of livestock, there is something here that threatens the community system.

Maybe the healed man was their scapegoat – the one who carried the demons of the entire community. If so, what happens when that scapegoat is gone, when they can no longer feel superior to him, and when the demons are out in public, looking for a new place to roost? What happens then?

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Happy Juneteenth! This is the first time Juneteenth is a national holiday, commemorating the end of slavery after the Civil War. It's not a new Jubilee Day, of course.

It's been celebrated in the Black community for over a century and a half, remembering the arrival of Union soldiers in Galveston, Texas, on June 19, 1865, with an Executive Order stating that "All slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them, becomes that between employer and hired laborer."

Texas was the most western, remote reach of American slavery, so freedom there was a powerful symbol of liberation and new beginning for all formerly enslaved people. When you read the oral histories of that day, the surge of joy and hope for the future is palpable. A real cause for celebration that is now a tradition for many Black families to gather, pass down history and culture, and reflect on where

the community has come from and where it is striving to go.¹

It is a holy thing to celebrate Juneteenth as one nation, for people of all races and ethnicities to give thanks for that day. But that's not the whole story.

Juneteenth was a bittersweet celebration in 1865 and it's a bittersweet one now. Since the Emancipation Proclamation was issued in January 1863; enslaved people in Texas had already been free for 2 ½ years. But that had not been communicated widely and there was no one to enforce it.

Sure, the mail system was slow, but the fuller truth is that those who *did* know had an interest in keeping 250,000 human souls in Texas in continued bondage. Economic interest, political interest, and ingrained racism – the foundations of white supremacy. So, they waited until they were forced to acknowledge the inherent dignity and freedom of people eternally and equally beloved by God.

The history of freedom from slavery in the US is hard-won, complicated, and incremental, and running alongside it is the evolutionary history of white dominance.

As you know, the Emancipation Proclamation was a watershed, but you might not know that it only applied to states that had seceded, not to loyal Union states. Enslaved people in Maryland, Missouri, Delaware, and Kentucky remained enslaved, and most had to wait three years for ratification of the 13th Amendment to have their freedom recognized.

And even then – the 13th Amendment allowed slavery or involuntary servitude for those in prison. It wasn't long before Black Codes restricted black people's right to own property and businesses and move about freely. Myriad vagrancy laws turned out of work men into convicts,² and conscripted labor and the criminal industrial complex was born.

After the Great Depression, The Federal Housing Authority developed programs to increase home ownership and boost employment. Its algorithm to assess property value penalized communities where Black people lived. Redlining was born. And still -- voter suppression laws, racial profiling in policing, unequal access to quality public education and health care. There remain so many barriers to true flourishing for people of color in this country.

In a forum last week with Canon Stephanie Spellers, Dr. Catherine Meeks said, "Juneteenth is a paradox. I'm glad it's a national holiday so that people can think and learn. But it's melancholy, too. We have so far to go to get where [people are truly free]."

Canon Spellers added, "A holiday [on its own] won't change anything. It's easy to declare a holiday, but hard to live into it. Does the US really want to step into liberation?"³

Do we?

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¹ <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/what-juneteenth>

²

https://blogs.loc.gov/inside_adams/2021/06/covict-leasing-system/

³ St. Bart's Forum, New York, June 14, 2022. See <https://stbarts.org/>

I'm still wondering about today's gospel story. God's desire for abundant life and liberation for all people shines through in Jesus' healing of the man in bondage. The certainty of that has been a source of strength and hope to Black Americans for centuries.

And -- here's another thing I noticed in the 6th C mosaic. Like most Western European religious art, Jesus, the healed man, and his follower are all light-skinned with Western European facial features. Often that's off-putting – Jesus and his disciples weren't white.

But today, when I look at the man in chains, possessed by a legion of demons, whose return to peace and dignity is a threat to others, I see a man who is carrying all the prejudices and systems of white domination on behalf of his community.

He can't imagine what another way of life looks like, so he says to Jesus, "What do you want with me? I can't be helped." But Jesus looks at the tormented man and sees a beloved child of God. So, he heals him and sends him back into his community as a living proclamation of what is possible when God is invited in to exorcise wrongs.

Canon Spellors is right. It is easy to declare a holiday and very hard to live into it. It's not about individual niceness. It's about changing the system.

For that to happen, individuals, this community, and the Episcopal church as a whole must:⁴

- See Black, Indigenous, and people of color as God does – human, whole, and beloved.
- Hear and tell the whole story of race and white supremacy in our church and in our country.
- Critically assess our stories of privilege, class and race, things done and left undone in the liberation of others. And,
- Use our power and privilege to repair what has been broken and clear space at the table so others can sit down.

It is hard. But nothing is impossible with God, who has already shown us how to live a life of service, sacrifice, death, and resurrection. May we be faithful to it. Amen.



⁴ Dr. Catherine Meeks, Stephanie Spellors, Lisa Sharon Harper, the Rev. William Barber.