

On Juneteenth

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Galatians 3:23-29

23 Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

An excerpt from General Order # 3 - Read in Galveston, TX on June 19, 1865:

"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 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 labor.

Folks, it's Juneteenth - Freedom Day - long a day of celebration now a federal holiday. *And* I'm a white woman who grew up in the South in a predominantly white community. I want to acknowledge all that - and say once again that I think white Christians have a particular obligation - pointed to by our scripture this morning and highlighted on Juneteenth - to understand the history of racism in the United States - celebrating

freedom on this day and working against racism and its impacts in the present.

I grew up hearing stories about the way things used to be. My folks had been part of their church for a long time and had been part of the church when racial divisions were the norm, were even codified into church rules. In fact, their tradition had split over slavery before the Civil War, and didn't come back together until 1939. Even then, "however, full voting rights and equal education for African Americans were not granted until the 1950s and 1960s. In The United Methodist Church, some annual conferences had legalized racism until the 1970s."¹ Our church was the center of my folks' lives, and they could see that the church, and they, needed to grow. I remember a conversation in which they told me they wanted me to grow up with different attitudes, different connections, different friendships than they'd had. They did not participate in the civil rights movement but twenty and thirty years later they could see how the world should be different, and they taught me they wanted me to embrace that change.

On this Father's day and Juneteenth I think of the way so many parents want better lives for our children, and for our children to live better lives - for every generation to grow in justice and equity, for every generation to get just a little closer to the great banquet that Jesus described. A place where everyone is treated with respect, equity, fairness, equality. A world that reflects the ideals of Galatians 3:28:

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Stephen Patterson has a theory:

The earliest creed of Christianity is found in the words of Galatians 3:28.

You are all Children of God.

There is no Jew or Greek;

¹ <https://www.r2hub.org/library/juneteenth>

There is no slave or free;
There is no male and female;
For you are all one.

Galatians is likely the second oldest piece of the Christian testament, written by Paul in the mid-50s CE, and everyone agrees that this portion is drawn from an even earlier baptismal liturgy - but Patterson believes the earliest creed of Christianity was a declaration of the equality of all people as children of God.² When we were studying this text in Bible Study this week, one person said: that's an ONA statement. And so it is. It's a creed that declares welcome and equity.

When we hear this text we may hear it as a wiping away of difference but I don't think that's true - rather it's a wiping away of the differentiation, the discrimination, the power differential set by these distinctions. To quote Eric Fistler, "The distinctions do not evaporate, they are simply left powerless...because the distinctions are cultural constructions, not the will of God."³ We are one in Christ - meant to live in Christ the same way that the earliest Christian communities lived - in an egalitarian and just way.

That way was as radical a departure from the culture of the ancient near east as the words of General Order 3 were from the culture of the Civil War South.

In Paul's time, "Freeborn Greek men knew who they were because they knew who they were not. Slave/free was the basic class divide in antiquity; Greek/barbarian was one of countless ethnic divides, often "racialized," to distinguish "us" from "them;" and man/woman was the unchallenged gender binary. To be on the free, native born, male side of these divides was to have power and privilege. Ancient freeborn native men were willing to engage in unspeakable brutality to defend their power and privilege."⁴

² "A Forgotten Creed in the Summer of Rage," Stephen Patterson, *Dialog Journal*, 2 July 2020.

³ PulpitFiction.com

⁴ *Ibid.*

But in Christ, people were one. Equal.

Even if the earliest Christians held a creed of racial equality, for most of Christian history we've failed. We haven't gotten there, at least not in this generation. It's not just a northern/southern thing, it's not just an urban/suburban/rural thing either.

We do not have far to turn to understand that the equality of all people is still a challenging topic in Christian communities. There's a Christian school less than forty miles from here. The faculty listened to a request from its own students. In an effort to witness to the equality of all its students and neighbors, "the inclusion and respect of all people" in the school's words, the school has for two years been displaying symbols that we here at Pilgrim display for the same reason: A Black Lives Matter banner and a Pride Flag. That school is part of a more hierarchical tradition, and they were told by their bishop this week to take the flags down or lose the support of their diocese. The school still has the flags up.⁵

If you look simply at the folks in the pews of most churches across the US, Dr. King's observation remains true: Sunday morning remains highly segregated. I don't want to suggest that I have the solution to racial separations within the church - and I wonder if it's a somewhat selfish goal anyway. But there are things predominantly white churches like ours should be doing. Learning our history is one, and on this Juneteenth there are plenty of ways to do that. Learning our present is another - and I urge you to take part in the Dismantling Racism offered in Lexington. We cannot be done with slavery until we understand the multigenerational impacts of chattel slavery, of peonage, of Jim Crow, of the prison industrial complex.⁶ We cannot fully live into Galatians 3:28 until we've looked at where we are as people of faith. As Christians, we have work to do.

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<https://nativityworcester.org/statement-to-community/?fbclid=IwAR1uJY82UInHzwXjl6948mxQ-HUkzL60hAUIUu2L5tiQpCCGDxNObvVwziM>

⁶ I'm indebted to Yvette Flunder for this point.

Listening to our neighbors is a third. In our session on White Nationalism Wednesday evening I was listening to Rev. Jeremy Battle of Western Avenue Baptist in Cambridge and my counterpart with Baptist students at HDS. I had suggested to the group on model of racial reconciliation and Rev. Battle gently challenged. Reconciliation is one thing, he said, but true equality is not achieved without the work of reparation and restoration as well. So a fourth thing we need to do is the hard work of sharing wealth and resources for the purpose of reparation and restoration. One of our Pilgrims messaged me after the session, noting honestly just how hard it is to broach that subject in a community of great privilege - but there it is. The wealth gap that exists between households between churches, between communities is one of the things that perpetuates inequality. Yet, afterward, our clergy panel reflected that chances to truly listen and be in community are steps toward the kingdom.

In that same panel, Rabbi Rachel Maimin of Temple Isaiah shared Rabbi *Michael Adam Latz's response to Martin Niemoller's words - though the poem calls upon members of the Jewish faith to stand for all neighbors I think it is the perfect call to Christians as well, so I'll close with it.*

First they came for the African Americans and I spoke up—
Because I am my sisters' and my brothers' keeper.
And then they came for the women and I spoke up—
Because women hold up half the sky.
And then they came for the immigrants and I spoke up—
Because I remember the ideals of our democracy.
And then they came for Transpeople,
And I spoke up,
Because God does not make mistakes.
And then they came for the Muslims and I spoke up—
Because they are my cousins and we are one human family.
And then they came for the Native Americans and Mother Earth and I
spoke up—
Because the blood-soaked land cries and the mountains weep.

They keep coming.
We keep rising up.
Because we Jews know the cost of silence.
We remember where we came from.
And we will link arms, because when you come for our neighbors, you
come for us—
and THAT just won't stand.

May it be so. Amen.

(This quote was not used in the sermon but is amazing....

I want to share more of Stephen Patterson's reflection:

“This is Christianity’s forgotten creed. It does not tell Christians what to believe about God or Jesus, or about salvation. Its declarations are about the realities of this world: there is no race, class, or gender. These are socially derived constructs we have lived by, but they are only that. We have believed them to be essential, but they are merely the artificial heart of a pernicious design: the nearly universal human system of “us and them.” We know who we are because we are not them. We are Romans, not barbarians; free, not slave; men not women; rich, not poor; Americans, not immigrants; educated, not ignorant; working men, not elitists; straight, not gay; white, not black; white not Mexican; white not Asian; white not Indian; white..., we are. We deserve the power and the privilege, they do not. The very first Christian creed exposed the contrivances by which human beings have in every time and place created and justified their power and privilege over against others. It declares that black lives matter, poor lives matter, women’s lives matter, and the distinctions that seemed to make them lesser lives were lies that wealthy, white men told, to hold

on to what they had. It claims that if you would be on the right side of history, you must join in the solidarity of black, brown and white; poor, rich and in between; female, male, gay, straight, and other; until, at last, the strictures of race, class, and gender are become the sins of an uncouth past we can hardly bear to contemplate. This ancient creed made these claims 2000 years ago in its own idiom. It is time now for the church to dust off its ancient creed and lay claim to it in our own time and place.”⁷)

⁷ Patterson, Ibid.