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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

June 19, 2022

Proper 7, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 65:1-9](#)

[Psalm 22:18-27](#)

[Galatians 3:23-29](#)

[Luke 8:26-39](#)

In the name of Jesus, the lover, the liberator, the life-giver of our souls: Amen.

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It was June of 1865 when Union General Gordon Granger's troops entered Galveston, Texas. It had been a long two and a half years since President Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation that officially ended all slavery in the Confederate states. A long two and a half years because there's a lot of territory between freedom "officially" and freedom when it reaches you. By the time freedom reached Galveston, Texas, Robert E. Lee's army had already surrendered more than two months earlier at Appomattox Court House. President Lincoln himself was dead. On June 19, 1865, a hundred and fifty-seven years ago today, General Granger issued a proclamation that all slaves in Texas were from then on to be free. The first Juneteenth. A day celebrated since then, especially in Texas and then spreading throughout the country, with picnics and parades and dancing and good food. A day of liberation made real.

Today we read about another day of liberation, the day freedom reached a man of Gerasa. He's freed from a different kind of slavery, a slavery to what scripture calls an unclean spirit that leads him to behave unpredictably and self-destructively. His neighbors see him as dangerous, and they lock him up and put chains on him. Maybe they're doing it to protect him. Or maybe they tell themselves they're doing it to protect him. It can be hard to know what to do with someone who's not like the rest of us. Still today we might lock people up when we see them as different or unpredictable or a threat. But Jesus arrives in the region and freedom arrives with him. Now of course Jesus had been active already for some time. Wherever he went people were being healed and set free. In a sense salvation came into the world the moment of the Incarnation, the moment God's presence took flesh in Jesus Christ. But for this man freedom came today.

Not that it made everything perfect for him. His neighbors, the very ones who had been imprisoning him and chaining him up, came to see what had happened and saw him clothed and in his right mind. But instead of being delighted, thrilled, relieved, it says they were afraid. So afraid they asked Jesus to leave the area. Better the devil you know, the saying goes. You might think this man's liberation would be good news for them too. But sometimes someone else's liberation isn't necessarily good news for us if it changes what we've become accustomed to.

It was like that too after Juneteenth. The liberation was real and so were the challenges. The slaves were freed but with no compensation, no forty acres or a mule. They were given the chance to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Seven years after liberation, four formerly enslaved Black leaders in Houston, not far from Galveston, bought ten acres of land to set aside so they could hold a celebration on the anniversary of General Granger's proclamation. They named it Emancipation Park and today marks its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. But at the same time as Black leaders and entrepreneurs were starting to create prospering communities,

the Klan was re-emerging and Jim Crow laws were starting to be written. In 1892 the Houston City Council voted to rename the street leading to Emancipation Park from East Broadway Street to Dowling Avenue in honor of a Confederate commander. In 1902 a poll tax was put in place to help keep Black people from voting. It wasn't until 1922 that the city of Houston's public parks were officially declared segregated. For about twenty years Emancipation Park was the only one in Houston open to Black citizens. Freedom doesn't always come all at once. Yet there are moments when it breaks out and those moments deserve to be celebrated.

St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, a group of Gentiles. There was a time in his life when he would never in his wildest dreams have believed he would write these words: "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." Paul met Jesus one day on a road to Damascus where he was headed to persecute Christians, put chains on them and drag them into jail. He left Damascus transformed and he shared that transformed heart of his with people all over the Roman Empire including those people of Galatia he wrote to in what we heard today. St. Paul was set free by Jesus and what he discovered was that the liberating love of Jesus changes all the divisions among people that we thought could never be changed.

It changes them in different ways. There is no longer Jew or Greek, Paul writes, which in one sense is true, and yet in another way our religious and racial identities are with us still. The Jewish people are and remain forever the first and original people of God, even as those of us who are Gentiles are grafted into God's people in a new way in Jesus Christ. So sometimes the love of Jesus leaves our differences in place and invites us to love one another across them.

There is no longer male and female, Paul writes, which is also true in one sense, and here as the liberating love of Jesus teaches us more and more about God's gift

of gender we are discovering that maleness and femaleness haven't gone away but are much more complex than some of us might ever have imagined, that there are shades in between and both/and and neither/nor, that sex and sexuality are rich and multifaceted. So sometimes the love of Jesus questions our dichotomies and invites us to discover more than just the old binary.

And then there is no longer slave and free, Paul writes, and it has taken us many, many centuries but the Spirit has continued speaking to God's people and taught us something Paul himself never knew, that God's will is for there to no longer be slave and free because there just simply are not to be slaves, that one whole side of this ancient dichotomy is absolutely contrary to God's will and cannot exist, that God's purpose is freedom, freedom for every human being.

God's Spirit is unleashing that freedom on the world. God has been doing it since the beginning of creation. God did it in a new way when Jesus Christ came into the world as one of us. God did it in a new way for the man of Gerasa when Jesus showed up in his graveyard home and healed him and called him into discipleship. God did it in a new way once and for all when Jesus died an unjust death on the cross and then conquered death by rising into new life to pave the way for all of us to follow. God does it in new ways for each of us whenever Jesus' love touches our own lives, when each of us hears the good news, when we are baptized, when we come to major spiritual turning points or even in the ordinary but transformative act of coming to this table week by week. Freedom doesn't always come all at once. But there are moments when it breaks out. And it's never going to stop breaking out until freedom rings from every corner of creation.