

On this day, 157 years ago, Major General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas to declare and enforce what had been proclaimed two-and-a-half years prior by President Abraham Lincoln: slavery was abolished and all slaves were to be freed. After nearly 250 years of slavery on the North American continent, a movement of liberation had finally begun. And today, we recognize this liberative movement, through the holiday known as Juneteenth.

Now, I have to admit that my knowledge and understanding of Juneteenth and the significance of this day has only recently begun to grow. Even just a few years ago, I had heard of it, but knew nothing of what it was about. A few years prior to that, I had never even heard of Juneteenth. But lack of awareness does not lessen significance. So I urge you, if you do not know about Juneteenth or its importance, take some time today and dig into it. Because yes, it is a day that marks the freedom from the bondage and pain and suffering of slavery for our black and brown brothers and sisters. But it is also a day to recognize that each of us has been created for freedom, to live freely, and are called to continue the work of liberation in Christ.

We don't know how this man came to live this way. We don't know how long the man was possessed by demons. We don't know when the town decided it was safest and best to isolate the man, leaving him chained in the tombs. But we do know that when Jesus and the disciples crossed the Sea of Galilee and they encountered this man on the shore, his suffering had gone on for far too long. Nothing about this man's lived experience reflected the life that God intends for the beloved creation. He was bound, held captive by a legion of demons. And Jesus came across the sea to set him free.

It's interesting that while we don't know how the man became possessed, we do know how the people in his city responded. He was driven into isolation, driven into what many in Jewish thought would call *tehome* or "the abyss." It was the place of nothingness. A bottomless, unending pit that later became understood as the home of the dead. And Luke reminds us that the man did not live in a home – he lived in the tombs. Literally, the abyss, the place of the dead, was his home. And lest he try to wander, he was kept shackled and chained and under guard. The response to his suffering was to leave him alone in it. The people in the city are willing to accept and even tolerate this man's suffering, so long as it does not affect them.

But this is not the way of God. We were not created to live alone, carry burdens alone, tough it out alone, suffer alone. We were not created to live in bondage to the powers of sin and death. We were created for freedom. We were created for love and to live in loving relationship and community. We were created to walk with one another, that though sin and death still manifest in this world, we will not be shaken because we are not alone. We were created to continue the work of Christ, who sets us free and makes us one. There is no longer distinctions or separations, but when any is suffering, when any is bound, we suffer too. We too are bound. In Christ, we are free and yet not fully free. Wherever and for whatever reason people are longing for liberation, we are called to speak the truth of the God who sets us free.

Because liberation is our Christian story. Liberation is at the heart of what we believe about God and what God in Christ Jesus has done for us. We cannot tell the story of our faith, we cannot proclaim the good news of the Gospel without speaking of liberation and freedom. For if we did not believe in the power of liberation, we ourselves would not be free from the powers of sin and death. If we did not believe in the power of liberation, we would have no purpose, no ministry to carry on in this world.

Except that we are baptized. We are baptized into Christ Jesus, who sets us free to be the people of God. And as we are baptized into this family of faith, we know that all is not free yet. We see a world in bondage. We know all too well that the chains of oppression and injustice continue to be present. All is not as it should be. And so we continue to speak the promise of God who liberates. We continue to proclaim Christ crucified and raised, who set us free from sin and death, that we may live. We continue to be moved and led by the Spirit who helps us to see and know that the good work to which we have been called is not done.

Happy Juneteenth, my friends. There is much to celebrate. There is much to rejoice about. For in our baptisms, God in Christ Jesus has liberated us from all that things that bind and helps us to see and know the humanity God desires for us and for all people. Now let us go forth, seeking and carrying on the work of that same liberative, freeing power of God for the sake of our neighbors. Let us go out into the world and share all that God has done for us. Amen.