

I've Got the Light of Freedom
 Galatians 5:1, 13-15; Mark 5:1-20
 Third Sunday after Pentecost, (June 21) 2020
 Kyle Childress

*Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority,
 it is time to pause and reflect.*

- Mark Twain

*Until the killing of black mothers' sons becomes as important to the rest of the
 country as the killing of white mothers' sons, we who believe in freedom cannot
 rest.*

- Ella Baker, 1964

In 1985 when I lived in Atlanta, GA and worked for the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, I also volunteered at the homeless shelter at nearby Oakhurst Baptist Church and lived in a big communal household consisting of nine of us: four homeless guys, a married couple, and three of us who volunteered or worked in various ministries. Together we worked on repairing and renovating the old house, worked the big garden, volunteered, ate together, and worshipped together down the street at Oakhurst.

Every Sunday in church I sat with Alemayehu, Sim, and Tommy: three homeless guys with whom I lived. Alemayehu was a devout Christian from the ancient Coptic tradition, and an Ethiopian political refugee who had been a fighter pilot in the Ethiopian air force. He was still trying to get his family out of Ethiopia. Sim, short for Simeon, was a white guy from deep poverty in rural South Carolina. He had been a Maytag repairman before losing his job and his family because of his alcoholism, though now he was in recovery. Tommy was a street savvy black guy from Atlanta, who was a Vietnam war veteran and who had also lost everything due to drugs and alcohol and was also in recovery. I was a bookish college-educated middle-class white kid from a small town in West Texas who had

already served four and half years as a pastor of a small rural Texas church. The four of us became fast friends and prayer partners. After church every Sunday we walked the three blocks home discussing the Bible and the sermon. It was an education for me.

More, it was a glimpse of being the church.

We read the Bible differently. The same Bible, the same verses, the same day and time, but we looked at the Bible differently. We read it from our contexts, our history, our particular vantage points. I remember the spirited conversation (and I use the term “spirited” on purpose) we had one Sunday about “freedom.” What was freedom and why was it important and how did we see the Bible speaking to us about it?

Alemayehu said he escaped the authoritarian government in Ethiopia that had ordered him to bomb unarmed villages because he wanted to be free from being forced to kill innocent people, so he could be free to love people.

Sim said freedom was to be free from the bottle. He yearned to be free from alcohol and its destructiveness in his life.

I recall that I said something about freedom being liberty to do what you want without anyone interfering.

Tommy responded by saying, “Freedom for me goes back to Juneteenth.” Alemayehu asked, “What’s Juneteenth?” And Tommy explained that it was on

June 19, 1865 after the Civil War had ended, that the slaves in the South found out they were free. Then he said, “And it seems to me that we still have work to do.”

At church that morning we had heard this passage from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians about freedom (the same passage we heard read a few minutes ago). But walking home we discussed Paul’s words from four different perspectives. This was a picture of the church doing its work: taking the Bible and reading it together with others. Each of us read it somewhat differently, coming from different backgrounds, different ways of seeing, being blind in some other ways, but together the Holy Spirit helped us see more fully and completely the work of God in ways we would have been blind to otherwise.

I learned how to read the Bible with three friends: an Ethiopian refugee, a poor white southerner, and a black guy from the streets.

Who do you read the Bible with? All of us read the Bible with someone else either explicitly or implicitly. For most of us, we still read with the assumptions and the points of view we had growing up. Likely we read the Bible with people just like us.

The church is larger and older than we are, and it is where the Holy Spirit helps us read and listen to the Bible alongside of others we meet from across the world and throughout time who are different. Without these other readers, we miss out on what God wants to teach us. And more importantly, we miss out on much of who God is.

From time to time this summer Sarah and I will be talking about some people we want you to be reading the Bible alongside. They will be from around the globe and from across history. Reading and listening like this is a practice and we want to practice it until it becomes a habit.

Many of you know I consider Fannie Lou Hamer of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement one of the greatest Christians of the 20th century. One of the things she said over and over to white people was, “Until I am free you are not free either.” Jane Stembridge was one of Ms. Hamer’s friends who was a white seminary student and the daughter of a Southern Baptist pastor. Jane came to Mississippi to work alongside of Ms. Hamer and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) to do voter registration during the Freedom Summer of 1964. Jane Stembridge wrote that she got involved in the civil rights movement because of a “great need” for freedom. “I came here because I, too, needed to be free, respected, a person, understood,” she said, “You see, this is my movement, too” (quoted in Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today*, p. 91).

Here were two sisters in Christ, one a poor black sharecropper and the other a white seminary student, both Baptists, working alongside one another – both because they sought to be free and knew that their freedom was tied to others’ freedom, as well. There was no patronizing “I’m here to help you be free.” It was “I need to be free too. And my freedom is tied to your freedom.”

When I read the Apostle Paul in Galatians alongside Fannie Lou Hamer and Jane Stembridge, I learn to notice how Paul does not define freedom as the individual doing whatever one wants. Instead, with Paul, Ms. Hamer and Ms.

Stembridge knew that freedom is a gift of God. Freedom is part of our salvation, in which we are set free from systems that enslave us, so that we are free to serve and love our neighbor (Gal. 5:14).

Ms. Hamer and Ms. Stembridge both worked for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC originated in the lunch counter sit-in movement, and besides voter registration, they did the Freedom Rider movement of integrating interstate transportation by riding on previously segregated buses. Nineteen-year-old John Lewis, now a U.S. Congressman, was in SNCC, and so were others like Bernard Lafayette, who was at SFA a few years ago. At the time, SNCC was made up mostly of young people, students, or what journalist David Halberstam called “the children.”

One of the things they had in common was that they were all trained by Ella Baker, considered the “mother” or we might even say, “the grandmother” of the Civil Rights Movement. Back in 1955, Ms. Baker had trained Rosa Parks at the Highlander Training Center in eastern Tennessee. Ms. Baker had a radically different approach to organizing and training from the dominant view of a charismatic or dynamic individual coming in and changing everything. Ms. Baker trained young people to do what’s now called “community building,” the slow, small work of tending to people, listening, learning, and helping people do what they didn’t know they could do. Bob Moses, who helped lead Freedom Summer in Mississippi, said, “That was how I learned to organize.... I heard my way through the world.” John Lewis said, “We were meeting people on their terms, not ours. If they were out in the field picking cotton, we would go out in that field and pick cotton with them.... Before we ever got around to saying what we had to say, we listened.” Jane Stembridge put it this way, “It all boils down to human

relationships... whether there shall be a we... It is ‘I am going to sit beside you’... Love alone is radical” (Hauerwas and Rom Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations Between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*, p. 67).

I wonder how Ms. Baker, and Jane Stenbridge, Fannie Lou Hamer, and John Lewis and Bob Moses might read our Gospel lesson about the Gadarene or Gerasene demoniac? I wonder how Alemayehu, Sim, and Tommy could help us hear and listen to this Bible story? Here was a man enslaved to what the Bible calls “an unclean spirit.” It obviously was a spirit of domination and diminishment. Let me give you a key interpretative insight: when the Bible talks about “an unclean spirit” or what the Apostle Paul calls “the powers and principalities,” learn to think of “a system of domination.” Learn to think of the spirit of systems that keep people in chains. He was both figuratively and literally in chains and he tried to harm himself over and over again.

When Jesus asked him his name, he said, “Legion, for we are many” (Mk. 5:9). Why did he use the name of the Roman army unit as his name? What was the connection? Listening to Alemayehu makes me wonder if his bondage had something to do with the Roman army equivalent of bombing innocent civilians. Perhaps killing innocent people as a Roman soldier in a Legion, had driven him out of his mind? Maybe he was addicted to drugs or alcohol as a way of coping with what he had done and what he had seen like Tommy?

Reading this story with Fannie Lou Hamer and Jane Stenbridge and Ella Baker also makes me think more about who this fellow was. If he named himself “Legion” maybe he was a Roman soldier. In the Roman Empire, Roman soldiers

were the military, but they were also the police. What if this guy was a policeman who needed to be free, too? What if he had choked too many people and was finally fed up with it all? What if he had been trained in such a way that in order to knock down doors and choke people or shoot people, he had become less than he knew he was created to be and had reached a breaking point? He needed to be set free just as much or perhaps more than the people he abused.

I don't know. I do know that listening and reading with others helps me ask different questions.

Jesus listens to him and helps the man name his bondage, "Legion." But why when Jesus cleansed and set the man free, did Jesus send the spirits of domination into a nearby herd of pigs, which made them go crazy and run over the cliff into the lake. Was this man's possession and bondage also related to being impoverished by working for slave wages for a "bootleg" pork feedlot across the lake from Jewish territory? (see Clarence Jordan for this interpretation). Reading this with Sim makes me think about the connection of bondage to poverty.

The man is set free. But someone who is genuinely free is someone who scares people. Mark tells us that the man was sitting there in his right mind and the people were afraid (5:15). The man wants to go with Jesus, but Jesus said, "No, go home to your friends and tell them how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy he has shown you" (5:18-19).

Ella Baker said freedom is a habit, one requiring constant practice (Marsh, Tuttle, and Rhodes, *Can I Get a Witness?* p. 126). I wonder if Jesus sent the man back to his family, friends, and community to testify and to practice freedom,

practice love, practice mercy? To practice freedom and mercy also means setting up expectations by people around us. In other words, seeing this man healed and set free, means that people expect him to continue to be free and be merciful. If he lapses, and he will, someone will hold him accountable. Someone will say, “Heh, I was in church the Sunday you stood up and gave your testimony about being set free, but you’re certainly not acting like it now.”

Ella Baker knew that freedom and mercy, love and grace were gifts that we had to practice and practice and practice, live into, and participate in. She knew that we must never give up because the work is never done. The powers and systems of death and domination and diminishment are always at work to keep us in bondage. All of us. We’re in bondage together and together, we seek to be free. We can never rest.

In the summer of 1964, Ms. Baker was speaking at the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party state convention. Two days before, there in Mississippi, the bodies of three young white civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were found nearby. Ms. Baker knew them and was grief-stricken, but she was also dismayed because while searching for these three young men, two of whom were white, several bodies of young black men had also been found and there was no outrage. That’s when Ms. Baker said, “Until the killing of black mothers’ sons becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of white mothers’ sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest” (see *Can I Get a Witness?* p. 130).

That was in 1964 and here we are in 2020 and Ella Baker is still having to say the same thing through Black Lives Matter. We cannot rest.

This Juneteenth weekend I remember from friends from long ago, and like Tommy told me walking down the street all those years ago, “It seems to me we still have work to do.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.