

Unexpected Freedom
Galatians 3:23-29
1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Juneteenth
Father's Day
Woodbury UMC
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There's a lot going on in this sermon, so to make it easier for you I will just tell you the main point right now. If you get lost, just consider how this concept fits in with what I am saying.

You are free. You just don't realize you are free, because no one told you that you are free. There are so many literary and cultural precedents for this, that I can't really wrap this sermon around just one.

A boy named Harry, learning there is an entire world of magic and wizards out there, changing everything he thought he knew about practically everything, and that he has an extremely personal connection to it. Learning this gives him agency over his own life, and an ability to help others as well.

A man named Neo, learning there is an entire world just beyond him that he knew nothing about, having been enslaved by the machines. Knowing this allows him to claim agency for his own life, and to save others.

A teen named Luke, living in a desert on a planet way way off the beaten path, then learning that the most important things in the galaxy have an extremely personal connection to him, changing everything he thought he knew about practically everything. Learning this allows him to gain agency over his own life, and then to save others.

Just about any fairy tale. The protagonist has troubles because of lack of money or statue or colleagues, and discovers they are a long lost princess, or heiress, or something about them that changes everything in their life that they had assumed about how the world works.

Joseph Campbell's seminal book *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* covers this archetype well.

Galatians is the focus for this morning. It is very short, but packs a tremendous amount into those short verses. Paul is writing to the Christian communities in Galatia, a large region with a lot of ethnically Celtic people — not Jewish people or anything like it. They have a serious problem. In order to be Christian, must they follow Mosaic law, as did most other Christians? They came from Jewish tradition, so were essentially adding a Christian identity on top of their existing Jewish identity. But what of those who didn't begin as Hebrews? Must they follow every step of those who came before them? Or can they simply recognize that the trail has been blazed for them, and claim the end result without taking that same route that brought others there?

It's a good question. Keep in mind, the way typical non-Hebrew religious behaviors worked before this. To be in good with the Gods, you respect the gods by doing something — making an offering, making a sacrifice — something physical, observable, measurable. What's more, you were expected to do this for each of the gods — there are plenty of gods, each new city had its own. So, you would spread your offering around, so that none of the gods were left out, you didn't risk offending anyone. And now, they are told there is only one God, who so far has only made two demands: to follow Christ — follow his teaching, follow his actions; and that they must stop worshipping other gods.

That is a big change! No wonder they are so confused, so concerned. Best not to antagonize this new, more powerful God by doing the wrong thing. They need more information! Their lives depend on it!

And they get a letter from Paul, saying to them they are already free, through the work of this Jesus, called the Christ. The prior categories—jewish or greek—don't matter, all the prior roles—slave or free—no longer matter either. There is no longer even male and female!—because all are one in Christ Jesus. I emphasize—this was not a magical letter from Paul, like a proclamation from the king that can save or end your life, or a ruling made by a judge. This was Paul doing his best to answer their question as definitely as he could. What does God require of you? What activities must you do to be right with God? Nothing more than to accept Christ, and they have already done that.

Just picture it. They have accepted Christ, they are used to giving offering, or sacrifice, or SOMETHING to appease the gods. Everything they know about the gods tells them that they are in danger of retribution for an offense they didn't even know they committed—and Paul says that isn't how it works, so no need to live in fear.

We have the same question, so this letter is just as instructive for us as it was for them. As I prepared for today, I reflected that this is a lesson we need to be taught again and again. Every generation needs to figure this out for themselves. We believe we are saved through grace, and yet the question of “yeah, but what else?” is always there, I'm guessing something baked in by our human nature. I'm thinking this is because what God offers is so thoroughly different from what the world offers. When Paul wrote those words, listeners knew that if you wanted to stay in Rome's good graces, you wouldn't get far just deciding you would accept them as being in charge—you had specific things expected of you, public ways you would pay tribute to Caesar, and ignoring them would get you in trouble. A public

showing of loyalty to your government and your leaders, making sure that everybody could see it. That was ancient Rome.

I was a teenager during the Reagan presidency, and during my lifetime there has been a movement towards greater and greater performative patriotism—if you aren't outdoing the other guy, they conclude they love America more than you. I am a better American than you, because I had way more American flags at my public rally than you did.

The more I thought about it, the more I started to get it. It is a lot easier to performatively love that physical symbol, than it is to privately enact what that symbol stands for. This has become terribly important to me, and it definitely deserves its own sermon at minimum.

During the same time frame, **not coincidentally**, we have also seen movement towards greater and greater performative religion—if you aren't loudly outdoing everyone, not only are you making it plain by your actions that you are not one of us, but maybe your soul isn't as safe as you thought it was. That's our national reality right now, isn't it—some claim to be the only ones who love this country we share, as demonstrated by their actions, just as some claim only they are the real Christians, demonstrated by how over the top they are.

As for me? I am persuaded by Paul—you don't need to do anything more, because you already have freedom in Christ. Even so, others may look at you and say wait a minute, we are all trying to outdo one another and you aren't part of it, I guess we are the only REAL Christians here.

In Romans 12:10, Paul will later say “Outdo each other in honor”

In Hebrews 10:24, (scripture says) “In response to all Christ has done for us, let us outdo each other in being helpful and kind to each other and in doing good.”

Paul does not imply or suggest that we are to outdo one another in getting a great big tattoo of Jesus on our back or arm, or via along Facebook posts saying “one like equals one prayer offered.” **That’s not the point!** If we compete, then compete in how kind we can be, and to how many people, and in how kind we can be, and how much good we can accomplish. Well, how do we do that? Can’t we just have Jesus airbrushed on your van, and be done with it, having demonstrated our devotion to Christ? If that was what counted, we would be right back at the beginning, when Paul said we were imprisoned by the law.

God made covenant with Abraham. The Old Testament is the story of how the people did honoring that, sometimes very poorly indeed—but throughout, God remains steadfast, keeping the promise. If you non-Hebrews accept Christ, you are part of that promise. Christian have a terrible history of too often believing that God’s promise has run its course and now God is starting again, with us. Nope. **That is a path to antisemitism. That very much deserves its own sermon, at a minimum.**

By all evidence, God’s promise is eternal, and now we who aren’t Abrahamic by blood have become Abrahamic by accepting Jesus. Does that mean that if you are a Christian, you are also an honorary Hebrew? Pretty much, yeah, it does, from this perspective. Those who were Hebrews from the start have other requirements, and if that is a good thing for them, then don’t stop them—but for those in Christ, we are no longer subjected to the law as our disciplinarian, and if you never were in that number in the first place, that’s fine. This is the ultimate “truth will set you free” scripture!

I started off with Harry, and Luke, and Neo as examples of this, but now I’d like to offer you two other examples that not only make the point, but suggest where as modern Christians worshiping in Woodbury we might go with this. Today is Juneteenth, a day signed into federal law just last year. How many had heard of Juneteenth before a year or two ago? How many think they have a good handle on

why it has been deemed worthy of a federal holiday? The meaning of the day is simple. It is a commemoration of the day that the very last enslaved people in the United States learned about emancipation, when Union Army general Gordon Granger proclaimed freedom for enslaved people in Texas, which was the last state of the Confederacy with institutional slavery, in 1865. The emancipation proclamation was signed into law in 1863. So that is two years of believing that people are in bondage, when in fact they are free.

In Galveston TX, people started commemorating this day in 1866. What may seem like something new has been continuously celebrated in this country for 156 years! So what seems to be new to us, has been a century and a half of tradition for other Americans. It is simply impossible for us as largely white, 21st century Americans to really grasp this. Harder still to comprehend the endless nightmare of the American system of enslavement, crueler than anything recorded in the Bible or practiced in Europe. And then—there was no one willing to tell you that something had changed, and now you were free.

These historical facts dovetail with our epistle reading, because it too speaks of a freedom that people didn't know they had until someone told them. We live in a time where the everyday abuse of so many African Americans has come to be recognized as fact by the rest of us Americans. I pray that elevating this important day to a holiday enables greater and greater understanding of the African American experience. Here's what I'm thinking. I mentioned in a sermon earlier this year that when MLK was murdered, 75% of the country was against him, against what he stood for, or both. And now, he is the closest thing we have to a universally recognized secular American saint. (By the way, If Dr. King is in first place, who is in second place? I am happy to debate any of you on this, but personally I'm pretty sure Mister Rogers is in second place.) My point being that universal adoration and recognition of his contributions was absolutely not the case before he got his holiday, and so with Juneteenth a holiday, perhaps more people will acknowledge stark differences between the African American experience and the white American

experience. And if we can acknowledge this reality, then maybe we can start to repair what has been so badly broken for so long.

This text may sound familiar, because it is not phrased so differently from the great commission. So very many people in need to be told that they are free! A great many of those also need to be told that they are free because Jesus already did the work to make them Children of God through faith, as Paul puts it in verse 26. There are some who are so focused on legalism that they don't see that we already live in freedom. They need to be told.

There's more. I saw a friend from the MCC tradition point out that we are currently in the season of Pride Tide. The church has long recognized Christmas Tide, or Easter Tide, so we already have an understanding of what Pride Tide means. Pride is marked by celebration, and I hope to get there next week, but for today I point out that the need for celebration is there due to the magnitude of what has been overcome, and to encourage those who still have so much to overcome.

There are between 1.6 and 2.8 million young people experiencing homelessness in the United States. One report from earlier this year found a disproportionate number of these youth identify as LGBTQ: about 40%, compared to a rate of 5 to 10% among the general population. These young people tend to become homeless at very young ages: on average, gay and lesbian youth become homeless in New York City at 14.4 years of age, and transgender youth at 13.5 years. In addition, 43% of youth surveyed said they became homeless when their parents forced them out of the home because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.¹ I could not find the citation I needed, but I am pretty confident that a lot of families cast out their own child because their church told them too. Every one of them is precious in the site of their creator, and they suffer because they are being told something false, with no one to counter that story.

¹ <https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources/hpr-resources/hmi-serves-new-york-lgbt-youth>

For Pride Tide, what better way to respond, than to reach people who have been told God cannot love them, and to let them know that God already loved them, that God never stopped loving them, and that God never will? Let's be real. Those enslaved people that didn't know they were free? There were people who did not WANT them to be told they were free, so telling this life-giving truth was dangerous.

How many people are told they are worthless, for all manner of reasons? People who are being preyed on — you tell them that they have the sacred in them, the mark of a divine creator? The people preying on them don't want them to hear it and will fight back.

People who are in bondage to addiction
People who are living with an abuser
People who believe they are not worthy of love

What would happen if all of them were told that Jesus has brought them all into the family of God, and all they had to do was to claim it?

So — we should go out there and change the world, right? We can't do that, for the best possible reason: Jesus already changed the world, but they don't know it. They still believe they can only be loved conditionally.

We have been considering, with all the things going on in the world and all the things going on in the denomination, what we as a congregation should do. Here is my plan:

Let's tell them. Let's tell as many of them as we can,
And let's start with the ones who have been told they are unacceptable.
Amen.