

Galatians 4:8-11, 5:1, 4-6, 13-15; Luke 10:25-37

Let Freedom Ring

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"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Did anyone else memorize these words when you were in high school? It's one of the few things I was required to memorize that I still remember. That and this, "Mica mica parva stella, miror quaenum sis tam bella" which is Latin for "Twinkle, twinkle little star, how I wonder what you are." A poem my 10th grade Latin teach made us memorize in the sticky, August heat of Wichita, Kansas during my first week of Latin II.

Isn't it odd the range of things our minds remember? Unlike the ditty "Twinkle, twinkle, little star," Thomas Jefferson's opening words from the Declaration of Independence still inspire and challenge us 243 years later. By some miracle, after extreme debate and deal making, much of it over the practice of slavery, the fifty-six men of the Continental Congress, signed the Declaration on what I'm sure was a very hot, sticky Philadelphia July day, over a century before air conditioning was invented. About this document, Joseph Ellis, a professor of history and biographer of Jefferson wrote, "That promise and those words are probably the most important words in American history—and possibly all modern history."

You might call it our country's birth certificate. It identifies who we understood ourselves created to be. Still, we have a long way to get to our birth weight. The battle of Gettysburg was fought from July 1 – July 3, in 1863, was the decisive battle in a grinding, horrific war in which over 700,000 lives were lost. The most in any war in American history. Later that year, on November 19, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln forever linked the battle of Gettysburg to the words of Jefferson saying, *"Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."*

Still struggling to live into the fullness of this "proposition" one hundred years later, on August 28, 1963, at the March on Washington, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. referred to it as a *"promissory note"* in his catalytic "I Have A Dream" speech. If you take a look at this speech on YouTube, you will see the sweat pouring off of Dr. King and the thousands and thousands who had marched for Civil Rights, for the equal rights of all people, all God's children, red and yellow, black and white – equally precious in God's sight. Marching to claim the propositions and proclamations of our nation. Marching in the hope that we would transform this "proposition" into our lived reality. Not just memorize in school but live into its promise in real life.

Today, as I stand in this pulpit on “July 4th Sunday” of 2019, over fifty years since the March on Washington for Civil Rights, and over one hundred and fifty years since Lincoln’s *Emancipation Proclamation*; today, as we struggle with a just way to count the inhabitants of our land, a just way to draw political districts free of partisan manipulation; a just way forward on immigration, the practice which birthed and formed our nation, I feel the “fierce urgency of now” to clarify our duty as Christ-followers and citizens of United States, to do what we can to make good on this promissory note. What should we do, *what can we do* to let freedom ring not only in the hearts but also on the ground for all who walk this land?

Let’s begin by remembering that we are Christians first, and Americans second. If we are Christians, as much as we may love our country, we must love God more. When we confess, “Jesus is Lord” we are proclaiming that *everything else*, including our country, comes second. When we say, “Jesus is Lord” we are claiming that the laser beam light of God’s LOVE, made known through Christ, charts the path for us. Although we regard the Declaration of Independence with reverence, the *most* sacred Word for us as Christians, is the Word of God. It is from the Bible, read in context & an in community, that we continue to learn who we are and whom God is calling us to become—as individuals, families, a church, and a nation.

And thanks be to God, that God continues to reveal the clarion call for full equality among and between all people of every race, class, gender identification, sexual orientation, immigration status, and any other way we chose to classify and divide people. This is a goal for which we stand and strive to better understand. God is still teaching us what this really means. Let’s be honest: Nobody gets it completely. Thomas Jefferson didn’t get it. Abraham Lincoln didn’t get it. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., didn’t get it. Nor did the Apostle Paul get it. He is wrestling with it again here in today’s Galatians passage. I know I don’t get it.

But Jesus did. Jesus also knew that being on God’s side, particularly on this issue, is *not* self-evident. We see this struggle again and again from Genesis to Revelation. While we rightly identify chattel slavery as America’s “Original Sin,” slavery was not original to America. It started long before America ever came into being. Looking back, we can wonder how slavery, how treating another human being, another child of God, no less precious than you or I, as property and subhuman could possibly be a part of God’s plan. And yet, it was not that clear for centuries, nor are we free of the practice today. In fact, Christians used their religion to not only justify but to glorify slavery. They framed it as their duty to “save” their slaves from eternal damnation. As utterly twisted as this sounds to us now, I am not suggesting that we stand in judgment or superiority over them—rather that we recognize our part in this sin, take responsibility and take up the practice of figuring out how to free others—regardless of zip code, education, or immigration status.

Let's look more closely at our Gospel story to see how Jesus widens the lens of the law-abiding lawyer to look upon the "Other" or the "outsider" as Jesus did. In these 11 verses of scripture, Jesus attempts to open the eyes of this good citizen to see the world through God's eyes. Then Jesus looks him straight in the eye with those penetrating brown eyes and commands him: "Go and do likewise." Knowing the right answer is one thing. Indeed, the right answer may be "self-evident" but "going and doing likewise" is another story.

The good citizen lawyer had memorized it a long time ago. But did he understand it? Did he "stand under it?" Jesus told him the parable of "The Good Samaritan" to shock, to inspire, to teach him the radical, risky business of taking God's side. God, who created everyone, not certain ones, in God's image. God who loves everyone equally. God who cares for each of us and all of us as if we were God's only child. God who calls us to love others as ourselves, even despicable Samaritans (or any other person or group of people we prefer to hate, or ignore or look down on). Really? I'm afraid so. Do we understand, are we willing to "stand under" the law which Jesus came to teach us, to show us, to offer us: life—real life; liberty—real freedom, the way of salvation, the way of life for all human-kind, which leads to happiness? I was pleased to discover from Jon Meacham (writer, reviewer and presidential biographer) that Jefferson's intent in his phrase "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" was not simply "smiley faces, self-esteem or even feelings. According to historians of happiness and of Aristotle, it was an ultimate good worth seeking for its own sake, from the Greek word for happiness "*eudaimonia*"—that evokes virtue, good conduct and generous citizenship. In sum: happiness that is derived from seeking the common good.ⁱ

Even the words of our founding fathers point us in the same direction as our scripture on this one. As much as we love and cherish our freedom: We are not free to choose not to care. There is no neutral position here. Either we care or we don't. And we are not free to choose not to care. Not if we want to follow Christ. We learn here, that according to Jesus, there is no such thing as a "non-neighbor." There are no boundaries that we can draw around our compassion and still be on God's side. It's that simple and that complicated.

This parable teaches us: We are no longer free to stereotype, if we want to follow Christ's command to "Go and do likewise." We are no longer free to write off any segment of God's children. Nor are we free to let arguing about the rules distract us from the real work, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Galatians: "the only thing that counts is faith working through love." (Gal. 5:6b) Yes, it's work. The spiritual freedom about which Paul was ranting in his letter to the churches in Galatia was to lift them out of a "civil conflict" between two approaches to this brand-new faith, just emerging about how to be a Christ-follower. Paul is writing about the spiritual freedom to seek God's side—the very opposite of self-indulgence. This is the freedom from self that frees us to see and seek to understand another point of view. It was a complicated then and throughout our history, if we are honest.

And, of course, it's still complicated today. Faithful Christians stand on both sides of all the major issues we face. But that does not give us an excuse to do nothing. To do nothing, is to do otherwise. I hear Jesus calling us, challenging us in our individual lives and our lives as citizens to something that Dr. Martin Luther King, called "a kind of dangerous unselfishness" a phrase he coined in his unforgettable "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech that he gave the night before he was assassinated. Let's listen to what he said. He was preaching about this very parable, beginning with the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. itself:

That's a dangerous road. In the days of Jesus it came to be known as the "Bloody Pass." And you know, it's possible that the priest and the Levite looked over that man on the ground and wondered if the robbers were still around. Or it's possible that they felt that the man on the ground was merely faking. And he was acting like he had been robbed and hurt, in order to seize them over there, lure them there for quick and easy seizure. And so the first question that the priest asked -- the first question that the Levite asked was, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But then the Good Samaritan came by. And he reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" If we stop at the question, "what will happen to me, if I stop and help this man, this woman, this group of oppressed or exploited people, and never get to the God question, "If I do not stop and help this man, what will happen to him? – then, my friends, I am afraid, we are doing otherwise.

Today, on July 4 Sunday, I must preach about the right to vote. The right to vote is a theological issue. It is a non-partisan issue. And as Rev. Dr. William J Barber II, lectured at the Festival of Homiletics conference I attended in May: It is a sin that the church does not address voter suppression. He proclaimed that this is our greatest national sin: voter suppression. It began with the constitution that excluded African Americans, women, and native Americans from voting. For centuries. Voter suppression flies in the face of what we believe as Christians and as Americans, and yet good Christians find numerous and insidious ways to continue the practice.ⁱⁱ Until every citizen is given the right to register to vote and a reasonable chance to get to the polls to cast his or her ballot, we are doing otherwise.

If we get so fed up with our government and/or our elected officers that we stop engaging constructively in our political process, free spirited Americans that we are,. If we aspire to be responsible citizens of our dear nation, if we want to be faithful Christians, trying our very best to be on God's side, if we want to let real freedom ring— It's going to take more than memorizing the words. The lawyer knew how to recite the law. We may know how to recite the Greatest Commandment and Declaration of Independence, but we need help doing them. Jesus knew this too. And so he gave us this meal, we are about to share saying, "Do this, in remembrance of me." Not "think this" or "say this" or "memorize this" but DO THIS – Love you neighbor as yourself. You CAN DO THIS, with me, because of me.

ⁱ Jon Meacham, *Time Magazine*, July 8 – 15, 2013, p. 40.

ⁱⁱ Taken from my notes of Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II's Lecture, May 14, 2019, Festival of Homiletics in Minneapolis, MN.