

# JUNETEENTH | SERMON

Galatians 3:23-29 | Luke 8:26-39 | St. Paul & the Redeemer | Rev. Catherine Healy | June 19, 2022

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If you were to make a “Greatest Hits” album of Bible verses, Galatians 3:28 would probably be on it. It’s always been one of my favorites, because it holds the promise that no matter our intrinsic differences, we all stand equal before the throne of God: “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.”

Being one in Christ is beautiful. Being equal regardless of gender or race is great. The problem is: “Slave or free” is not an intrinsic difference.

Now, St. Paul was writing this letter in the first century. You can argue that his framework for understanding slavery and freedom was different from ours—as it should be. We are not first-century Galatians. We are living in the United States, under the shadow of the history of American slavery. And today, on Juneteenth, we remember the day when the last enslaved Black Americans finally became free. That was in 1865, 157 years ago—as Matthew Desmond observed in *The New York Times*, not even two average American lifetimes.<sup>1</sup>

It’s a day for joy: a celebration of Black freedom and Black resilience. And it’s a day for somber reflection. We know that the legacy of slavery, and the reality of anti-Blackness, is still very much with us. If we are people who seek to live lives in imitation of Christ—and I hope that we are—then the question before us is the same question we have to

live with the rest of the time: Knowing what we know, how is Jesus calling us to respond?

The first step, I think, is to *name* what we know as people of faith. Like I said, we are not living in the first century. We have the advantage of looking at history through the lens of Scripture, holistically—including some books of the Bible that hadn’t been written down yet when Paul was writing to the people of Galatia.

And so we understand some things that the Galatians didn’t. It’s obvious now how forced bondage of human beings is antithetical to the message of the Gospels. Jesus was not remotely concerned with helping the powerful consolidate their wealth. Instead, he directed his attention to the liberation of the powerless. The moment he was invited to read from the Bible in his synagogue, he lifted up the heavy scroll and turned all the way through it until he reached the words of the prophet Isaiah: “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives . . . to let the oppressed go free.”<sup>2</sup> And in Paul’s letters, we learn further that “in Christ Jesus [we] are all children of God through faith.”<sup>3</sup> However race and ancestry matter for us, they are negligible in determining our status before God.

And relatedly, we have to name what history books have tried not to teach us: that enslavement is anything *but* an intrinsic difference. The recent

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Desmond, [In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation](#), *The New York Times*, August 14, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:18, quoting Isaiah 61:1.

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 3:26.

trend toward describing enslaved people as “enslaved people,” rather than “slaves,” is an attempt to remind us of this. To call any person in history a “slave” suggests in some small way that slavery has the power to define them. It also conveniently erases the roles of human power and human sin from the conversation. To say “enslaved person” is to be forced to ask: *Who enslaved this person?*

We have to answer that question. And we have to understand, really understand, the brutality of slavery. I speak here to my fellow white people, because in my experience, we’re the ones who have the option not to know. The place we would have learned about the near-unthinkable physical, sexual, and emotional violence of enslavement is in school, and none of that history is appropriate for children—which is no comfort to the children who lived through it.

Finally, the life and teachings of Jesus demand that we take action. The aftermath of slavery infuses every part of our daily lives, in the way Black Americans have been denied opportunities to build generational wealth, and through segregation, redlining, mass incarceration, environmental racism, and systematic divestment of resources from Black neighborhoods. To paraphrase: It’s the reason you can’t swim in the Grand Calumet River, the reason the public school across the park from us depends on our church to raise money for its music program, and the reason that potholes never seem to get fixed above 47<sup>th</sup> Street.

It’s tempting to compare these problems to the demons in the Gospel of Luke, and beg Jesus to cast them out. But the truth is, there’s nothing

supernatural about racism. It is a human evil, and with God’s help, we must find a human way to bring about its end.

And yet: Juneteenth is a reminder that, along with the legacy of slavery, we have the legacy of freedom, and that where there is oppression there is always resistance. Today is a celebration of emancipation and empowerment, and a reminder not to give up on hope for the future. It’s true: Big, systemic problems require big, systemic solutions. No individual acting alone is going to undo four hundred years of history. But we don’t have to act alone. We are many, but we are one body, and we have the power to act as one for the healing of the world.

Are you bothered by watching industrial waste slowly poison the Southeast Side? Call your state representative to tell them about it. Do you believe that Black students deserve excellence in arts education? You can show it locally, by supporting our partnership with Shoemith School, and nationally, by writing to your members of Congress. Do you want to support the building of wealth in Black communities? You can put your money where your principles are, support Black-owned businesses, and demand that our city invest in the streets and neighborhoods where those businesses are based. And yes, sometimes that’s as small as making some noise about potholes.

Paul reminds us that we are all “heirs according to the promise.”<sup>4</sup> We can act in faith to build a world where the dynamics of “slave or free” are a distant memory. Then we will truly be able to say that all of us are one in Christ Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> Galatians 3:29.