

One in Christ Jesus
Galatians 3:23-29

Second Sunday after Pentecost/ 19th June 2022

It is fitting, probably providential, that today's lectionary reading from Galatians falls on Juneteenth. Of all Paul's epistles, Galatians is known as the epistle of Christian freedom (which we'll explore on July 4th weekend). "For freedom," Paul wrote to the church in Galatia, "for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1). As Paul came to know in his own life, and as we have come to know in ours, the good news of God in Christ Jesus brings *freedom*, and liberty, and emancipation, "release to the captives," as Jesus himself read in the synagogue in Nazareth, reading from the scroll of Isaiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus read, "because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," that is, "to proclaim the year of the jubilee of the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19). These words cast a vision of ministry for Jesus and all those graced to bear his name. Yes, then and now and always—Jesus means freedom. Jesus means liberty. Wherever he goes, he brings freedom. Wherever he goes, he brings release. Wherever he goes, he offers freedom; he creates free people. He sets the captives free and grants new life and grants a new future. That's what Christ had come to do and continues to do in us. This, therefore, means that every follower, everyone who bears the name of Christ, for all of us who bear his name are emancipators. We are liberators, too, in his name. And to do anything else is anti-Christ! *Full stop.*

"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." These words, in Galatians 5:1, are the culmination of Paul's intent to make sure his church knows that the way of Christ is radical and revolutionary and counter-cultural. It's a way that cuts against what is natural, cuts against human nature, cuts against what we consider normal, and cuts against all that is regarded as "lawful." Paul's reference to "law" refers to the Jewish law, Torah, and it can also refer to Roman law and the oppressive ordering of Roman society by that law, which was no friend to either Jews or Gentiles. And Roman law and society were built upon assumptions made by Hellenism, the philosophy of Greek culture.

Now, I would like to put a spotlight on something very important here as a background for this text. Greco-Roman society (and by extension into the Jewish world) was built upon the conception of binary opposites. There was a "table of opposites" [used] as a device for explaining the deep structure of the cosmos introduced into philosophical discourse already by Pythagoras and later used by Plato and Aristotle."¹ This table of opposites sets up *two oppositional columns of unequal weight and value*. Items listed on one side of the column were complementary to each other in some way and, at the same time, opposed and superior to the counterparts in the other column. Opposites, unequal opposites. One was superior, and the other was inferior. The table notes, "superior-inferior, infinite-finite, odd-even, one-many, right-left, male-female, rest-motion, straight-crooked, light-darkness, good-evil."² This is only a sampling. There was spirit-body, active-passive, form-matter, Roman-barbarian. The inherent imbalance in this dualism ordering of reality has shaped the history of the West. And we can extend this classification system to other binaries, such as rich-poor, free-slave, white-black, straight-gay,

us-them. It's also inherent within Judaism, Jew-Gentile. This way is the "law," the *nomos*. This is the way the world works from a Greco-Roman perspective, which also influenced Judaism.

And this "law," this given structure of things, this worldview, this way of putting everything together, all came crashing down for Paul when he realized that the law, this kind of law doesn't save us but further enslaves. Paul writes, "Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith" (Gal. 3:23-26). In other words, Paul says, we discovered in Christ that there is a different law at work, a different norm that now guides God's people, and that "law," that norm, that new *nomos* is love and grace.³

The Jewish rabbi and philosopher Jacob Taubes (1923-1987), who was an expert on Paul's use of the term "law" throughout his letters, believed that Paul was both a "radical Jew" as well as a radical critic of Roman law and order. And he argues that the earthquake that shook the foundations of Paul's reality was the revelation that the law is not Lord, the law is not Caesar, and the law is not *imperator*. Jacob Taubes sums up the crisis for Paul in this way, "It isn't *nomos* [that is, the law] but rather the one who was nailed to the cross by [the law, by] *nomos* who is the [true] *imperator!*"⁴ In other words, the one nailed to the cross by the law is now the true Lord. That's why Paul says, "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:19). Not the emperor. The crucified one is Lord, not Caesar, which means that the ordering of his laws, supported by its binary structure or scaffolding of reality, now all comes crashing down.

All that was considered valuable and of value before has now been transvalued. In fact, the gospel entails—to use the language of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who was no friend of the gospel, but he indirectly points to what the gospel does—the gospel entails "the transvaluation of all the values of this world."⁵ It's a radical shift of seismic proportions, a shift in consciousness, awareness, understanding, and knowledge. It's precisely for this reason—and only for this reason—Paul could write to the Galatians and elsewhere in his letters, this extraordinary claim, this profound, counter-cultural, revolutionary insight, an insight of knowledge and truth and wisdom and grace, it's only because of that experience that he could write these words: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 5:28).

It just takes your breath away. Unbelievable.

I wonder, did this insight come to Paul in a moment in a flash of insight, or did it take years of intense theological and inner, psychological struggle and work to get there? Either way, it's nothing less than the grace of God, an earthquake that shook the foundations of Paul's life and demolished all that he thought was true, shaking the foundation of everything true and strong and firm and lasting in his life and then sending him out into the world to preach this good news. "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Are we on the side of this freedom, or are we standing in the way? Are we people offering that good news and being emancipators, living by a new law, or are we as a church standing in the way?

I confess that I didn't know that June 19, Juneteenth, was an African American Emancipation Day until just a couple of years ago. Perhaps you're in the same boat. I knew that Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, only freed enslaved blacks in areas of the Confederacy occupied by the Union Army. Therefore, I always assumed slavery ended throughout the South on April 9, 1865, when Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House. But, it took some time for the Union army to get to the far reaches of the Confederacy. Galveston, Texas, was the last region to come under Union control. Union Army General Gordon Granger's first order of business was to read to the people of Texas, General Order Number 3, on June 19, 1865, which began with these words: "The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of rights and rights of property between"—listen to this language—"former masters and slaves and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired laborer." It says nothing about rights.

I have come to know that—and I find this striking—the Juneteenth celebrations in the black communities were church-centered festivities. They celebrated in churches. And I find it even more remarkable that Juneteenth celebrations were often called Jubilees, an obvious biblical reference. Christianity's history with the institution of slavery, as we all know, is mixed. We have done much for which we need to ask forgiveness. In fact, white Christians have done horrible things for which we need to seek forgiveness from our black and brown siblings; we need to repair the breach and bind up the wounds of the church and the nation. And by "we," I mean white Christians, the white church—which bears the responsibility, it's the responsibility of the predominantly white Church to do this work, seek forgiveness, and understand the sins of the past. Given what white Christians have done to blacks for centuries, if you think about it, it's nothing less than the grace of God that so many blacks have remained Christian today. Perhaps they have a deeper insight into what the God of Moses prefers.

Starting from the 17th century in America, there were churches that were against the trade of enslaved Africans and the institution of slavery, but there were just as many churches that saw nothing wrong with slavery because they did not see Africans as human beings created in the image of God. Some pastors and theologians developed contorted, even depraved justifications of slavery, citing scripture. Some Presbyterian pastors fought against slavery, and some Presbyterian pastors did not. I was back in Princeton, NJ, recently and walked past the home of the first presidents of the university, founded by Presbyterians, and came across a new historical marker that tells a disturbing story. Sixteen enslaved men, women, and children were listed as the personal property of five former presidents of Princeton University—all Presbyterian ministers—including Jonathan Edwards. The marker lists the names of the enslaved – if known. Some churches supported slavery—in the south and the north. And some churches fought against slavery – both in the south and the north. There were Christians who refused to support Jim Crow and tried to dismantle its grotesque laws, and many Christians looked the other way. Some churches supported segregation or prospered from white flight after they left the city, such as

Baltimore (we can easily list the churches in the presbytery). Some churches tried to integrate and stay in the city and paid a price. There are churches that supported the work of the civil rights movement and praised Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, but there were just as many churches that were silent and had less than kind things to say of King. Today, some churches still refuse to say that black lives matter. Some pastors refuse to denounce racism as sin, fearing what their congregations will say or do to them. However, some churches are trying to do their part to bring awareness to the racism that sits in each one of us and to do their part to try to dismantle racism.

When we go over this painful history—and this is only the surface—and go back and consider the radical views of Paul, consider his views of the church and what it means to be Christian, it's easy to see how much the church got wrong about following Jesus, how much has been anti-Christ. And we see there's much for us to confess. We must confess our complicity in creating the structures and ideologies that have contributed to the mess we find ourselves in as a country, as the recent shooting in Buffalo, NY, reminds us all too clearly. Or the attack on predominantly brown children in Uvalde, Texas. Or look at the Patriot Front white supremacist group that planned last week's attack, a plan to unleash violence at a Pride event in Montana. Or think of the white supremacist groups among the insurrectionists on January 6, 2021, when the Confederate rebel flag was waved for the first time in the U.S. Capitol—while symbolically disturbing, it's nothing compared to what they would like to unleash upon this nation. While Christian flags and flags with the name JESUS were flying together in the mob that day, that was *not* the way of Jesus Christ. That is not the way of Jesus Christ. That is anti-Christ.

Now we can be down and depressed with this history. And this history is heavy. And sometimes, I think we just need to be uncomfortable with it all. And that's okay. To note our uncomfortableness.

But the good news—and I'm reluctant to go to the good news too quickly here—but the good news is that despite the many sins of the Church, and there are many, the Lord of the Church continues to work through us, dream through us, and strive with us, his people. "For freedom Christ has set us free." We who have experienced the freedom of Christ cannot sit by and withhold that same freedom from others or remain silent in the face of oppression or look the other way when we see someone bound or change the subject when we become uncomfortable. We can, of course, look away and do nothing and often do or stand in the way of another's freedom and emancipation, but as we know, that is not the way of Christ; that is the way of further enslavement, that way is the way of sin, the way of anti-Christ. Our way is Christ's way. We, the church, are being formed and reformed into a community where formerly disparate groups and races and identities can come together around this one table, around one Lord, to be Christ's people, to be one. The church still has something to say in this world today. We still have something to offer the healing of our society and nation. The church can be a voice of so much goodness, reform, and change. Let us look for the places and people that need liberating, that need emancipation, that need release, places, and people that need to know and feel the Lord's jubilee. Let us be liberators. Let us be emancipators. For *this* is the way of Christ.



¹ See Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 23-24.

² Kahl, 23-24.

³ Kahl refers to this as the “politics of love.” She writes, “Love means continual mindfulness in discerning, disobeying, and unfreezing the antithetical nomos [“law”] of self versus other that is set in stone and cast in iron everywhere; that imprisons and deforms every human being under the regimen of what Paul calls “sin” (269).

⁴ Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul: Cultural Memory of the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 23-24, cited in Kahl, 9.

⁵ Taubes, 24, cited in Kahl, 10. On Friedrich Nietzsche, “transvaluation of all values,” see his work *The Antichrist* (1895) and *The Will to Power* (1901).