



EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION DAY AND JUNETEENTH

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Tuesday, January 1, 2008: Emancipation Proclamation Day
Or Thursday, June 19, 2008: Juneteenth**

Editorial Note: Since Emancipation Proclamation Day and Juneteenth share important historical and cultural connections, we explore them under the same lectionary reading. Some congregations will choose to celebrate each of these moments separately. Others will elect to celebrate one or the other at the appropriate time in the liturgical calendar.

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Lection Scripture - John 8:31-38 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 31) Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; (v. 32) and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (v. 33) They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?” (v. 34) Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. (v. 35) The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. (v. 36) So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. (v. 37) I know that you are descendants of Abraham; yet you look for an opportunity to kill me, because there is no place in you for my word. (v. 38) I declare what I have seen in the Father’s presence; as for you, you should do what you have heard from the Father.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment: Emancipation Proclamation Day

On Thursday, January 1, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, liberating slaves in states that seceded from the Union. The Emancipation Proclamation was not a moral testimony against slavery but rather a military tactic. Nonetheless, the proclamation’s anti-slavery sentiment heralded the dawn of a new day for African Americans.

In spite of the proclamation’s symbolic importance, African American emancipation has come neither quickly nor easily. Frederick Douglass declared that January 1, 1863 was

“the most memorable day in American annals.” Aware, however, of the difficulties of achieving freedom, Douglass further commented, “The slave will yet remain in some sense a slave, long after the chains are taken from his limbs.”

Frederick Douglass’ words still convey a haunting truth. While African Americans enjoy certain freedoms, our emancipation efforts must continue. The mental shackles of self-hatred and self-inflicted oppression are replacing the metal shackles we once donned during chattel slavery. As each year begins, African Americans gather in churches on January 1 to ask for God’s guidance and strength as we cast off the oppression that binds us, whether it comes from outside or inside of us.

For further information, consult William K. Klingaman, *Abraham Lincoln and the Road to Emancipation, 1861-1865* (Viking: New York, 2001), 195-260. The quotations from Frederick Douglass are found on p. 234.

Description of the Liturgical Moment: Juneteenth

Juneteenth originated in Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865. On this date, the people of Texas learned that the Civil War had ended and slaves had gained their freedom. Major General Gordon Granger, the leader of the Union troops, issued General Order Number 3, emancipating the last 250,000 slaves who remained captive despite President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Justice was delayed but ultimately not denied.

The name Juneteenth may capture the excitement those slaves felt. According to the “Queen’s English,” the celebration should be called “June Nineteenth.” But when chains of captivity fell from their bodies and souls, their tongues were not concerned about grammar. Newfound freedom prompted the creation of a new word, “Juneteenth.”

Today, African Americans celebrate Juneteenth as a reminder of the cruelty of slavery and of our God-given right to equality and freedom. Also, Juneteenth is a time to remember that justice is still being denied to many contemporary African Americans. The evidence is overwhelming: Brothers still get arrested for “DWB” (Driving While Brown); less than one percent of corporate heads are African Americans; African Americans still get “redlined” when trying to secure loans for homes and businesses; and in 2005, the fierce winds of Hurricane Katrina exposed an ironic truth at the heart of the United States’ so-called democracy: “colored” people are more dispensable than white people in this country. Consequently, African Americans must continue to emphasize education, self-advancement, and community development.

In some cities, Juneteenth festivities are held for an entire week, ending on June 19. For further information, consult <http://www.juneteenth.com> (accessed: October 20, 2007).

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: John 8:31-38

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Freedom—the quest for it and the denial of it—lies at the heart of African American experience. In the dark night of slavery, church mothers moaned for it, and preachers intoned about it. For many enslaved African Americans, freedom was worth more than life itself. Thus, the spiritual declared, “Oh freedom, oh freedom, oh freedom over me/and before I’d be a slave, I’ll be buried in my grave/And go home to my Lord and be free.”

As a college-educated, middle-class minister and professor, I enjoy many of the freedoms for which our African American ancestors struggled, such as educational and financial opportunities. Yet amid these freedoms, never have African Americans been more on the brink of returning to an even more regrettable form of bondage—a self-imposed slavery. African American educational underachievement, our failure to produce and sustain widespread financial wealth in African American communities, our infatuation with violence, and the alarming number of incarcerated African Americans are placing shackles again on African American communities. The social tension in African American life between freedom and slavery creates an intriguing backdrop for the interpretation of Jesus’ words concerning freedom and slavery in John 8.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

John 8:31-38 is a “drama” in progress. Its context extends back to John 7:1-13, where Jesus travels to Jerusalem for the Jewish Festival of Tabernacles, also known as the Festival of Booths. Jews from all over Israel would ascend to Jerusalem for this eight-day celebration.

The festival marked the end of the fall harvest (Exodus 23:16) and God’s guidance of Israel in the wilderness journey from Egyptian slavery toward freedom (Leviticus 23:39-43). During the festival, pilgrims built tabernacles or small temporary booths, which symbolized God’s sheltering presence during Israel’s wilderness sojourn. Other rituals included the gathering of water from the Pool of Siloam to pour upon the altar and the lighting of candles.

In John 7-8, Jesus depicts himself as the actual fulfillment of Israel’s faith and hope, which the Festival of Tabernacles symbolically commemorated. As important as the water from the Pool of Siloam and the lighting of candles were in the Festival of Tabernacles, Jesus declares that he is the supreme source of living water (7:37-38) and the light of the world, burning brighter than any candle ever could (8:12). Finally, in John 8:31-38, Jesus asserts that he, too, is the ultimate source of *freedom*, the concept at the heart of the Festival of Tabernacles.

Jesus declares that his followers will receive divine truth that will emancipate them (v. 32). Certain persons in the crowd take offense at Jesus’ claim, believing that they had never been slaves and are already free. Jesus refutes their response, reminding them of the enslaving nature of sin (v. 34). The exchange between Jesus and his opponents in vv. 33-35 contains interesting perspectives on the role of *denial* in the perpetuation of slavery of any kind.

By claiming to be “descendants of Abraham,” Jesus’ opponents connect themselves to Israel’s history. Yet in that history, the Jews, indeed, were slaves to foreign powers. For example, the Festival of Tabernacles celebrated Israel’s escape from Egyptian slavery. Centuries later, the Jews were also slaves in Babylon. Furthermore, during the time of Jesus, Israel was in political captivity to Rome.

Jesus has just declared that the *truth* emancipates people, and immediately his opponents offer a *false* assessment of their history (8:33). The denial of former servitude can become a new kind of slavery. African Americans should be ever aware of this danger. Given the brutality and shameful treatment of our slave experience, it is understandable why African Americans would want to deny that part of our history. But the denial has created the most sinister conditions for a new, self-imposed slavery.

Only a people in denial would allow themselves to fall again into a contemporary social situation potentially as destructive as their former enslavement. Had we adequately remembered that literacy was once a crime for African Americans, we would not have tolerated poor academic performance among our youth. Had we adequately remembered the violence visited upon black women by white slave masters, we would not have been so silent about the domestic violence occurring among our own African American Christian congregations, nor about the debasing treatment of our young women in videos and songs.

In addition to the dangers of communal denial, many African Americans are also in personal denial about the sins that have enslaved us. Jesus’ response in v. 34 solemnly reminds us of the enslaving potential of certain behaviors and attitudes. Preachers can use John 8:31-38 to explore sensitively the “chains” that shackle so many people. There are persons who need to be set free from bondage related to low-self esteem, selfishness, criminal behavior, food, nicotine, alcohol, cocaine, sex, pornography, and gambling to name but a few. While such bondages are real, Jesus extends to all the promise of freedom!

Celebration

Jesus declares that the truth makes us free, and Jesus is a living example of divine truth! When we enter into relationship with Jesus, there are possibilities for parole from all the forces that imprison us. Instead of living in denial, African Americans should live by the divine truths uttered to us by Jesus: We are made in the image of God! God desires for us abundant lives marked by peace, prosperity, and generosity! And since we have only one Lord—Jesus—to whom we must answer, we should never let anyone or anything become master over us! If we live by these truths, the ultimate “Emancipation Proclamation” belongs to us: “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (v. 36).

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The strong, assuring tone in Jesus' declarations (vv. 31-32, 34-38); the sarcasm and disdain in the voices of Jesus' opponents (v. 33);

Sights: While this text does not specify many visual details, its action occurs around the Jerusalem Temple during the festive celebration of Tabernacles. Preachers might imaginatively reconstruct the busy scenes around the Temple as Jewish pilgrims prepare to leave the festival. As a fall festival, Tabernacles marked the onset of cold weather. Thus, preachers might describe the changing colors of the landscape. During the celebration, there were regular processions that involved pilgrims carrying and waving branches from palm, willow, and myrtle trees. So the streets might have been covered with the remains from these; and branches.

Smells, Tastes, and Textures: This text invites preachers to imagine the smells, tastes, and textures of forces that enslave us and from which we need Jesus to liberate us (vv. 34, 36). For example, people struggling with an addiction to nicotine often talk about both the smell of cigarette smoke and the texture of cigarettes upon their lips and fingers. Yet preachers should use caution when dealing with people's addictions, which are places of genuine struggle and spiritual warfare. There is a long, unfortunate history of preachers sounding "self-righteous" in the pulpit, when speaking about topics such as addiction. Instead, preachers should provide spiritual encouragement and guidance as people seek emancipation from their addictions.

• **Quotation**

"To be free means the ability to deal with the realities of one's situation so as not to be overcome by them."

Thurman, Howard. My Soul Looks Back, 'Less I Forget: A Collection of Quotations by People of Color. Ed. Dorothy Winbush Riley. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1991. p. 149.