

Proper 11, Pentecost 7, Year A (RCL)
July 19, 2020
New Song Church
Jane Stewart

Isaiah 44:6-8
Psalm 86:11-17
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

What We Long For

It is decision time, Paul tells the believers in Rome. What's it going to be? Life in the flesh, or life in the Spirit? I wonder if he had the words of Deuteronomy 30 in his head, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life . . .," [Deut. 30:19b-20]. Whether he did or he didn't, Paul is asking the Romans, as Moses asked the Israelites, to live their faith with intentionality and to be clear about what those intentions are and what they mean for their future together as a people.

I don't know about you, but I've always thought that this passage, as well as other writings of Paul, showed his disdain for the human body and human desires – particularly sexual desires – and that he was asking us to rise above those to live on some sort of higher, spiritual plane of existence. But according to scholar Lisa Isherwood, I've had it wrong all this time. She explains, "Paul was not a dualist: nowhere in his letters do we find a contrast between body (soma) and soul or spirit (psyche). (However,) there is a persistent construct between flesh (sarx) and spirit (pneuma)" which are not the same thing at all! She goes on to say that "Paul uses the term 'flesh' as a kind of shorthand to describe the human being (both body and soul) in its fallen state and 'spirit' to describe the person in its redeemed state."ⁱ

So the real choice we have is to live in a fallen or a redeemed state. But what, exactly, does that mean? It feels as though we've traded one strange dichotomy for another. Enter the Rev. Dr. Monya Stubbs to clear this up for us. She explains that for Paul, to live "according to the flesh," or in a fallen state, is a mindset in which we think only of our own self-interest without any regard for the needs, rights, or interests of others. It is an ideology "that ultimately denies human dignity and destroys human capacities for love and peace."

Life in the flesh is more than just a choice that we have though, it is a power that actively resists the Spirit of God and pulls us toward itself. It must be vanquished if we are to be free from what Paul calls "the bondage of decay" to "obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." It is not a freedom from the material world, but freedom to be the people God created us to be in the first place – people who live according to the Spirit, people who live in a way that values and respects the gifts, the rights, and the lives of others and allows us to live together in community in love and peace.ⁱⁱ

As Christians, this life in the Spirit and this "Ubuntu" kind of community is what we long for – what "all creation has been groaning in labor pains until now" for, straining forward in the hope of a freedom we cannot yet see but desperately want to see birthed. Now. Ironically, Lutheran theologian Mary Hinkle Shore points out that this hope is one of the very causes of our suffering. She says that Paul's, "Definition of suffering will be broadened in verses 35-39 to include anything that threatens to separate us from God's

love. (But) for now, the suffering Paul speaks of is suffering that comes from knowing what the world could be, even as we live in the world as it is.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And that’s the tension, isn’t it? We live in the in between time.

Paul says that because “we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” But I don’t think that Paul is asking us to wait passively – after all, he just used an image of natural childbirth which is, in my experience, anything but passive! Instead, we lean into the new reality we long for.

Three leaders in the Episcopal Church, the Rev. Kelly Brown Douglas, the Rev. Stephanie Spellers, and the Rev. Winnie Varghese, leaned into the new reality they would like to see for the Episcopal Church when on July 4, they shared their vision of that new reality in their essay “Speaking of Freedom.” It is powerful. And it is not the least bit passive.

I want to hit some of the highlights of it for you and will put the link in the chat so that you can read the entire essay for yourself. They begin:

“On July 4th, our country celebrates its Independence. Our Episcopal Church also marks this as a major Feast Day, a day to pray in thanksgiving for the founders who ‘won liberty for themselves and for us, and lit the torch of freedom for nations then unborn.’

“Yet, we must ask, what is the meaning of freedom in such a time as this, when the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately ravages Black, Brown and First Nations communities suffering the pre-existing conditions of injustice

and inequality? What is the meaning of freedom, when Black bodies continue to be brutalized by policing that has its roots in slave patrols? What is freedom when our Breonnas are not safe in their homes, our Ahmauds are not safe jogging, and our Erics, Elijahs and Georges cry out, 'I can't breathe'?

"For the church, freedom must be more than a song we sing or a flag we wave. It must begin with the cross that calls us to claim freedom . . . from America's original sin: White supremacy. We long for the day that our church might be free to become what we have until now only aspired to be: a true church following a crucified and risen Lord and witnessing to God's just future. And so we write this day, three women, three Episcopal priests, two of African descent, one South Indian, reflecting on what freedom means. We are fueled by a shared hope that our Episcopal Church can indeed live into what it means to be church and thus lead the nation into what it means to be truly free."^{iv}

They go on to outline four things Freedom means to them and that they believe could transform the Episcopal Church into the kind of church that lives by the Spirit and not by the flesh. I've edited their points to make them shorter, but the words used are theirs.

First, Freedom means transformative truth-telling. "Transformative truth-telling" they say, "takes responsibility for that past . . . naming the ways the church has been shaped by and continues to benefit from the complex realities of White supremacy — and then doing that which is necessary systemically, culturally and theologically to free the church from its sin. . . .

We must tell the truth of our story as the church of wealthy slaveholders and traders. We must speak of Episcopalians who were personally responsible for the forced migration and extermination of Native peoples, and others who penned best-selling tracts laying out the biblical case for slavery. We must tell the truth about congregations that advertised lynchings in their Sunday bulletins. We must speak of church support for 'sundown towns', internment camps and Asian exclusion acts.

Second, Freedom means transformative letting-go. To let-go is to free ourselves institutionally and individually of that which stands between us and the dream of God: Whiteness itself. . . . Steeped as it is in White supremacy, our denomination must model transformative letting-go and decide whether it is going to be White (that is, allied with oppression) or be church. Jesus made his choice. In his crucifixion, he let-go of anything that set him apart from the crucified classes of people of his day. He understood that it is only when the least of these are able to breathe freely, that the sacred humanity of all is restored.

Third, Freedom means being born from above. "To be born from above . . . is to hold ourselves accountable not to the way things are, but to the way God has promised us they will be: a Beloved Community marked by compassion, love and justice.

. . . To be born from above, our church will need to join in reimagining and fostering new ways of being a society and a people."

Finally, Freedom Means Living into our Baptism. In this moment, we must do the institutional and personal work of transformative truth-telling and

repentance. As truths come to light, we can commit to change structures, behaviors and practices that participate — even unconsciously — in White supremacy. . . . and instead embrace a way of life that looks like Jesus. . .

We must reimagine “criminal” justice. This begins with discarding a system of policing born of injustice, and promoting models that aim for community flourishing and freedom from the violence of systemic poverty and inequity. No one can claim to be free as long as these systems ruthlessly shackle, diminish and destroy the children of God.v

At the end of “Speaking of Freedom,” they ask, “Can a denomination steeped in White supremacy turn and dedicate its life to dismantling the very structures of death that it blessed and built? Can it become Beloved Community, where the flourishing of every person and all creation is the hope of each, where the oppressed are liberated from oppression, and oppressors are at last free of the sin that oppresses?”

We believe that, with God’s help, The Episcopal Church can become an instrument not of oppression but of God’s peace. It can grow followers of Jesus who are more concerned about taking up the cross of our crucified Lord than they are about maintaining the control and privilege of a crucifying culture.”vi

It is decision time, beloved of God. What’s it going to be? Life in the flesh or life in the Spirit?

How about we go out and, in the words of John Lewis, “Make some good trouble.”

Discussion questions:

- The essay calls white supremacy America's original sin. How do you react to that statement?
- What helps you be hopeful?
- What kind of good trouble do we hear God calling us to?

i From *Enfleshed*, for July 19, 2020.

ii From *Enfleshed*, for July 19, 2020. Edited.

iii Mary Hinkle Shore in *WorkingPreacher.org* for July 19, 2020.

iv Essay, *Speaking of Freedom*, by the Rev. Kelly Brown Douglas, the Rev. Stephanie Spellers, and the Rev. Winnie Verghese. July 4, 2020.

v Ibid.

vi Ibid