

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

6.21.26

This Friday was Juneteenth, marking the day in 1865 when a Union Army general arrived in Galveston, Texas, to read aloud the proclamation that “All slaves are free.”

All slaves are free. Now most of the people hearing the announcement already knew that the Civil War had ended. They also knew that two years earlier, Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Some folks listening had in fact fled to this remote part of the country in the final weeks and days of the war, taking their enslaved adults and children with them, in order to evade the law and keep their free labor for as long as possible.

The announcement, “All slaves are free,” was partly intended for the Black people listening, to give them public support for their right to walk away from their enslavers. But mostly, the announcement was intended for the white people in the audience continuing to hold people in bondage. It was not so much a news announcement as a law enforcement announcement.

Juneteenth is a reminder to us that freedom is not marked by a single date or a single act, it did not happen with the stroke of Lincoln’s pen or the end of a war or one general’s announcement. Freedom is a process we have to all keep working on and witnessing for.

In today’s reading from Genesis we see Abraham and Sarah sending Hagar and her son Ishmael away, into the desert, possibly to die. Hagar, an enslaved woman from Egypt, who had a son fathered by Abraham, at Sarah’s request. Sarah and Abraham didn’t think they could have children of their own, but when God gives them their miracle baby Isaac, suddenly Hagar and Ishmael are not wanted, they are inconvenient. They need to be deported back to where they came from.

This story troubles the story of our ancestors Abraham and Sarah. It complicates the simple tale that they were obedient to God’s call, they left their home, they were blessed with a child in old age, and they founded a nation of people.

It seems that for Abraham and Sarah, on the road to becoming a new people there was family conflict, separation, and violence. It seems that they sometimes took matters into their own hands rather than waiting for God’s blessings in God’s time. And by doing so, they caused immense harm.

The writers of the Bible made the strong decision to include these painful complications in the story of the ancestors, to not just keep the simple and rosy picture but to give us all of it, the triumphant and the shameful. Just like the addition of Juneteenth to our holidays complicates but also enriches the story of our country's becoming, our work for the vision of freedom for all.

Son against father, daughter against mother, and one's foes will be in one's own household. Jesus is giving stern and bracing news for those who would become his disciples. Follow me, and there will be conflict, follow me, and some people will not like you, follow me, and you may be at odds with your own family.

Now we here today, living in the world as it is now, we can see what Jesus is saying clearly. We see the deep divisions among us, we know many examples of families unable to talk to each other. We see people who were integral to communities being sent away. We are living these complicated painful stories, these Abraham and Sarah and Hagar stories.

Son against father, daughter against mother. This is not a theoretical thing Jesus is saying to us in today's Gospel. We are living it.

Today, right in the middle of these difficult times, we are baptizing Lewis.

Today, we are declaring and marking with water and oil that Lewis belongs, that he is God's beloved child, that he is part of the Christian family, that he is part of this St Martin's household.

In spite of all that is going on, we say as a community that being together, with all its complications, is worth it. It is worth it. It is vital.

With a community around us, we are better able to do what we promise to do in baptism, to renounce the evil powers of this world, to persevere in resisting evil. With a community around us, practicing fellowship and breaking bread together, we are better able to work on the big vows we take in baptism. To seek and serve Christ in all people. To strive for justice and peace in the world.

Jesus gives his harsh instructions in today's Gospel because he knows how hard the thing he is asking is. Jesus' own ministry cost him his life. And yet Jesus came to show us that conflict, violence, death, are not the end of the story. He came to show us a way to freedom that is not easy, it is not simple, it means walking right into conflict and towards suffering and looking directly at painful truths.

It is not easy. And it is the way to love and freedom and wholeness.

Today we recognize Lewis as part of this family of God. This family where a couple banished a woman and her child, and God saw them and saved them in the wilderness. This family where we treated each other as property, a family where we are still needing to open our eyes to the Galvestons, the places where we are still doing wrong and where people are not yet free.

Today we recognize Lewis as a beloved member of this messy, divided, and vital and loving family, the Body of Christ. We promise to support him in his journey. We remind ourselves of our own journey. We remind ourselves that we are on this road together, with each other, and with Jesus. Amen.