

Open our minds warm our hearts, but also bend our wills for, we seek to hear your word amen.

From the lakes of Minnesota, to the Hills of Tennessee, across the Plains of Texas, from sea to shining sea. From Detroit down to Houston and New York to LA, there is pride in every American heart and it's time we stand and say that we want to be proud to be Americans. We want this, we want this so deeply, but we know that for too long, our nation has been plagued by fear and driven by greed.

For too long, we have been obsessed with excess and content with capitalism. For too long, we have ignored the cries of the plagued, the poor and the outcast. And for too long, we have preferred that Jesus leave us alone, rather than be empowered by his commandment to love and to heal. To proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captive, and recovery of sight to the blind.

When I was a little girl, I vividly remember greeting my great-grandmother Hazel and my aunts, Maude and Arlene, when they would come to visit us at our home in St. Louis. I would meet them at the door and show them to their seats and I would put on a concert for them, the best American music. From the lakes of Minnesota, to the Hills of Tennessee, across the Plains of Texas, from sea to shining sea.

Now I was five years old, so all that I knew then about the institution of slavery was that it was a bad thing that happened a long time ago in a faraway place to people who were long gone. It was like a fairy tale story where the prince, Abraham Lincoln, came in on a white horse and rescued the princess America and they lived happily ever after. Freedom.

I was so free at that time, I felt so free that it never occurred to me that others might not be so free. I was proud of my freedom, but I didn't really know where it actually came from. What I didn't know then that thankfully I do now, is that knowing that I am free, is not a limited privilege to be hoarded. Freedom is a gift from God that we are meant to share with others.

The man we meet in our Gospel lesson today, opposite Jesus is plagued by many demons. A whole Legion of them as the lesson tells us. This man is held captive by poverty, abandonment, homelessness, and the lack of the basic necessities of life. He is naked, unpredictable, and alone, living among the dead.

Out of a great sense of fear and likely a great sense of helplessness, the community around him know not what to do, but bind him in chains and shackles and lock him away out of sight, and out of mind. Like the prophet says to us, the people lift their voices with a resounding 'do not come near to me for, I am too holy for you.' And it is in this place that Jesus steps out of his boat and draws near to the suffering man. And he asks him his name.

In their encounter with one another. Jesus proves to the man that nothing and no one are beyond the reach of God's liberating and life-giving love, nothing. Not only him, who has been outcast by society. In ancient, middle Eastern demonology it was widely believed that demons cannot survive in water. That's why over and over again in our scriptures, we see people meeting at the holy place near the river. Demons were opposite this. They were relegated to wilderness places where water was life, desert was death. And so, when the swine are driven off the cliff and into the lake, we see God's liberation in the drowning of evil forces that plagued the man. The man who once before was held captive by evil, is now set free.

You might think that the story should end there. I've heard the story a dozen times or more in my life, in the church, and usually that's where it ends in my mind. A man possessed by demons is healed by Jesus,

the end of the story, happily ever after, the end. But if we leave the story there, we see only the man's individual and personal healing, and we miss the chance to place ourselves in the midst of this message of liberation.

The drowning of the pigs is not good news to everyone, as it turns out, it is certainly not good news to the swine herders, the farmers who owned these pigs, the people whose economic livelihood depended on these creatures of God that they have come to possess. This upheaval and subversion of the system is not welcomed by these and not welcomed by those who have benefited long from a system that was happy to keep the freed man in chains rather than look for a collective salvation.

Odd as it may sound, we still often prefer the devil we know, to the freedom we have not yet seen. And seeing that the people were not yet ready to accept his radical message of love and freedom, Jesus gets back into his boat to leave them, ready to go to the next place in need of healing. And the man who has been set free begs of him, Jesus, let me come with you. And while I do believe that Jesus had compassion for the man, he knew that the only thing that would turn the people's hearts and to help them live would be to witness one of their own who once was lost and now was found, enslaved by sin and now set free, teach them what love looks like. Only this man whom they had feared for so long, would be able to show them the way to new life. Return to your home, Jesus says to the man, and tell the people how much God has done for you.

Just last year, Juneteenth was declared a national holiday in the United States of America in recognition of the reality that the fairy tale story of our liberation doesn't end with the emancipation proclamation. God is still working out our plan of salvation on us and on our nation. We still see freedom stockpiled. Kept from many who are endowed with such inalienable rights by their creator.

What I didn't know when I was a little child that I'm glad I know now is that demons cannot live in the waters of baptism. And we, as God's people, have the blessing and the great responsibility to exercise them from our hearts and our souls, from our homes and our communities, from our nation and from our world.

What, I didn't know when I was a little child that I'm glad I know now, is that slavery is not that long ago, and not that far away. It is present in our labor market and our prison system, in our economy and in our schools, it is present in our wage gap and in our healthcare system. Oppression is a Legion, but we are a force to be reckoned with.

God's story of liberation is just beginning, and we will look those demons in the eye and ask them their name and we will drive them out. We will go to the people and tell them how much God has done for us, and we will sing a new song. We will lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring. Ring with the harmony of Liberty. Let our rejoicing rise, High as the listening skies, let it resound loud as the rolling sea. Amen.