

Third Sunday after the Pentecost
June 19, 2022
Southampton, MA

Scripture: Galatians 3:23-29

Maybe serendipity aligned today's epistle lesson from the revised common lectionary with Juneteenth, also known as Black Independence Day. On this day in 1865 news arrived in Galveston, Texas that enslaved people were freed. It came a little more than two months after Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox and more than 2½ years after Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

We know from Acts that the Church's formation was not a smooth trajectory. Disputes over the Jesus movement's membership were frequent, most notably between Jews and Gentiles. Though Peter effectively made the case to include Gentiles in the movement, which resolved itself by defining the movement as Christian, separate from Judaism, tensions remained. Paul's letter to the Galatians sought to dissipate these tensions by making clear that people baptized in Christ "were clothed in Christ," whether they were Jew or Gentile.

Though this epistle addressed the early Church, it is particularly relevant today, which became apparent after last month's shooting in Buffalo. The shooter published a long screed espousing white supremacy. Its foundation is these 14 words, "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children"¹

These words are not just against Blacks. They are against LatinX, Asians, Muslims, and Jews, basically anyone who is not of White Western European Christian descent. Furthermore, they aren't new. We heard similar language in 2017 during the clash in Charlottesville, Virginia. Variations of this have become increasingly common on the far right along the lines of

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/10000005360556/white-supremacist-symbols-charlottesville.html?searchResultPosition=21>

“immigrants are coming to this country to take it away from you.” Furthermore, some media outlets amplify and echo this sentiment. Some political leaders say the same in veiled ways while their allies remain silent despite the obvious racist dog whistles.

Disturbingly, White Supremacy’s 14 words have its roots in Christianity. The source, though, is not scripture. Rather, how scripture was interpreted, applied, and expanded through tradition. This is a very condensed rendering of how we got to today.

Up until the beginning of the fourth century, Christians were a persecuted minority. After Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity around 313, though a minority religion, its persecution ended. It also implicitly became the state religion.

Judaism believed Israel’s power to prevail over its adversaries was a sign of God’s favor. In other words, its chosenness was the source of its power. Under Constantine, its power was the source of its chosenness. This shift promoted the empire’s hubris. As the state religion, it believed that it had the authority and the mandate to spread Christianity throughout the empire. Its justification could have been Jesus’ final words to his disciples, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

At the end of the 11th Century, Pope Urban II launched the first Crusade in 1095 to check the spread of Islam and restore Christianity to the Holy Lands. Several crusades followed. Prince Edward of England led the final significant Crusade in 1271.

Beginning in 1436, a series of three papal bulls issued within two decades of each other established a theological justification to spread Christianity to conquered lands and force indigenous people to become Christians. Known as the Doctrine of Discovery, its thin theology proclaimed the superiority of western European culture and values over the culture and values of

the indigenous people the explorers encountered in their journeys. Over the following centuries, this led to oppression and genocide.

The Doctrine of Discovery was a foundational belief among the western European explorers. In 1823 it became U. S. policy when Chief Justice Marshall used it in the case Johnson vs. McIntosh. The outcome ruled that Native Americans only had the right of occupancy of the land, not ownership.² It effectively stripped them of their claim to the land and became the foundation of the federal government's relationship with them. Several years later, known as the Trail of Tears, the government forced the migration of Native Americans in the Southeast to lands west of the Mississippi. It also was behind the American dream, Manifest Destiny. Today, it underlies American exceptionalism.

This horrendous doctrine has been reworked into the Great Replacement Theory, which fundamentally is White Supremacy's 14 words and Christian nationalism's justification. Though racism is contrary to all of Jesus' teaching, it lives in Christian nationalists because their theological perspective rests upon centuries of Christian hubris.

Racism is this nation's scourge. Despite the news on June 19, 1865, racism enslaves all of us today. Many of us know from our study of White Privilege two summers ago that many churches have White Jesus. Thankfully, we are not one of them. We became aware of how racism affects almost every facet of American life such as housing, education, medical care, and criminal justice. The negative effects in the environment, such as pollution and climate change, fall disproportionately upon communities of color. Racism is the implicit justification for Stand Your Ground laws. Even before the recent spate of new voting laws, voting was more difficult for people living in communities of color.

² <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/271.html>
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Even if we do not feel threatened because of the color of our skin or that we hold no racial animosity, racism touches every one of us every day. Though racism is not the sole reason, it is a contributing factor in the way we've organized ourselves in this nation: the proliferation of guns, the persistence of poverty, the maldistribution of wealth, the disproportionate incarceration, and the misallocation of government resources. All of this has generated pervasive fear, anxiety, and despair. It has translated into mental illness, drug addiction, and broken families. It has denied the basic right of every person, their human dignity. It has polarized our nation. It has rendered our government dysfunctional.

We cannot rise to our full potential or live in true freedom when racism shackles our hands and feet. Dr. King wrote in 1963, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds."³

Two years ago, this nation was passionate about anti-racism. I fear, though, that passion has dissipated. Last month's shooting in Buffalo made clear that racism remains a clear danger. We must speak out against racism. We must stay in solidarity and support with people of color. We must be more attuned to what we read and hear on the news. Listen for its bias, which may be unintentional, and if possible, call out the source. We must build our own awareness of how decisions and initiatives by the government or other organizations will impact people and communities of color, and if possible, urge alternative measures. We should also undertake a

³ Martin Luther King, Jr. Letter from Birmingham City Jail.
https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

long overdue critical discernment of Christian traditions and theology, how they hinder inclusivity, and how we can apply Christ's teachings to make real God's peace and justice.

Paul urged the Jews and Gentiles to close their division because what they had in common was belief in Jesus Christ. Reframed in today's national context, they tell us that we are, as Dr. King noted, all in these United States and that no one is an outsider.

Racism is society's toxin. As long as it remains, it will continue to leach its poison into us. It will keep us sick. It will destroy this nation. It will keep us from experiencing true freedom and the kingdom of God.

Langston Hughes expressed the paradox of this nation's ideals and racism in his poem *Let America Be America Again*, excerpted here:

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—

Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!