

*Galatians 3:23-29*

*Luke 8:26-39*

*Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway*

*June 19, 2022 Juneteenth*

## Somebodiness

So it was Thursday morning when I learned I would be preaching this Sunday. I told Irene, sure, no problem when she told me the situation. She and I are a team and this Covid life is making for a lot of last minute adjustments for all of us.

But my usual plan-ahead-self got some exercise in adapting this week. My routine when I am preaching is to read through the texts a few weeks ahead and begin to ruminate on them, deciding which of the 4 suggested texts are speaking to me. Once I settle on the one or two I am feeling called to wrestle with, I begin to think and pray about what I may say in a sermon. But sometimes the Spirit does not work that way. Life happens and the best laid plans get tossed and a new path becomes the right path. Such is the case this week.

When I looked at the texts - on Thursday - it struck me as a very 'God Thing' that these two texts we heard this morning are the lectionary, suggested readings for today, the day we are celebrating/remembering Juneteenth. In fact you may get another Juneteenth sermon from Irene because she was really looking forward to preaching today too.

Juneteenth (short for "June Nineteenth") marks the day when federal troops arrived in Galveston, Texas in 1865 to take control of the state and ensure that all enslaved people be freed. The freedom did not come over night. Not by a long shot. And it had been two and a half years since the Emancipation Proclamation had been signed, but it was the day those who were enslaved were told they were free and that day has been celebrated ever since. In 2021 it officially became a federal holiday.

In some of the reading I did in preparation for this morning I came across an account of a sermon preached at the memorial service for Muhammed Ali back in 2016. The preacher was Rev. Dr. Kevin Cosby, a Southern Baptist preacher from Louisville, KY. Dr. Cosby, an African American, began his speech by recalling an

interview Merv Griffin had with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the Merv Griffin Show in 1967. Griffin asked Dr. King, “What has been the greatest impact and effect the civil rights struggle has had on the Negro?” Dr. King responded, “besides the dismantling of barriers that prohibited the Negro from free access, the greatest and most profound effect of the civil rights movement is that it has infused something in the Negro that the Negro needed all along, and that was a sense of ‘somebodiness’.”<sup>1</sup>

Cosby went on to say that we will not appreciate the need for that sense of somebodiness until we can understand the 350 years of ‘nobodiness’ that was infused into the psyche of people of color in our nation. From the sacred documents of our history to the hallowed institutions, our entire culture has conspired to convince the African in America that when God made the African God was guilty of “creative malfeasance”, that God intended to bring harm. Every institution from religion to entertainment infused in the psyche of the African American that he or she was inferior.

Cosby then recounted some historical incidences when that began to change in sports, in the military, in civil right activism. He then talked about the life of Muhammad Ali, saying that in his life Ali took the ethos of somebodiness to unheard of heights. When Ali said, ‘I am black and I am pretty.’ he was infusing in Africans a sense of somebodiness. Of pride and of *self*. Cosby said, ‘Ali was a product of difficult times, and he dared to love black people at a time when black people had a problem loving themselves. He dared to affirm the beauty of blackness. He dared to love America’s most unloved race. He loved us all, and we knew he loved us.’

I can not begin to put myself in the place of descendants of enslaved Americans. I am doing my best to listen and learn and stand along side now. It seems like maybe the Black Lives Matter movement is our present day continuation of this claim to somebodiness. And I felt this week that these two texts we heard this morning are at least two of our scripture’s powerful affirmation that somebodiness for everyone is at the heart of our faith.

The passage that Steven read from Paul’s letter to the Christian community in Galatia is a familiar one. The apostle Paul here is calling out the issues that divided the church in his day, and he negates them in one sentence. “There is no longer Jew

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpdtjXd7ZhU>

nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Today we might add, just to make it crystal clear, there is no longer black or white, gay or straight, Wall Street or no street; all are one in Christ Jesus. These words of Paul’s are as powerful and *important* now as they were then. There is no stratus system, no hierarchy within our faith - no place for ‘nobodiness’. Never was and never will be, and it is our business now to live this truth in all that we do and say. The man who greeted Jesus at the lakeside in the story we read in Luke’s gospel was ‘nobodiness’ in embodied. He was homeless. He had no clothes. Even his name was lost to him. When Jesus asked him his name he identified himself only by the multitude of demons he bore. “I am Legion.”

David Lose, a Lutheran pastor writes of Legion, “Oppressed by too many demons to count, he has lost himself in the cacophony of their voices and has ceased being a self, an individual, a person.”<sup>2</sup> But, Lose continues, “The names and claims that the voices of this world may shout at us do not have the last word.”

It is to this man, this ‘nobody’ to the world around, that Jesus gives his healing touch. This is a story of identity restored, somebodiness reclaimed. This is the ministry of Christ and the work of God in the world - that no one feels less than, outside, marginalized.

Though the man was healed on the inside - all of his demons left him at Jesus’ command, entering a herd of swine and rushing off a cliff to their permanent demise - it was clearly going to take time for his community to catch up.

When somebodiness is re-found, when identity as a child of God is restored and reclaimed the road to reconciliation can be bumpy and so often slow. We see this today on personal, national and global dimensions. We see it here in Luke’s story. When the people of the community came out to see what had happened and they found the man at Jesus’ feet, clothed and in his right mind, they were afraid. They wanted Jesus to go away. Change is hard. As odd as it may sound, we often prefer the devil we know to the freedom we do not. Dr. Lose again writes, “If Luke’s depiction of Jesus’ ministry is any indication, effecting change among a fearful community can be even more difficult than stilling storms or casting out demons.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Lose, *Feasting on the Word*, year C, volume 3, page 169.

<sup>3</sup> David Lose, *Feasting on the Word*, year C, volume 3, page 171.

How well do we know this right now? “If Luke’s depiction of Jesus’ ministry is any indication, effecting change among a fearful community can be even more difficult than stilling storms or casting out demons.”

The path to wholeness and justice Paul expressed in his words to the Galatians and Jesus lived in his ministry rarely happens with the speed with which it happened for the man previously known as Legion. And, as we know well, it must happen not only for us as individuals but for us as communities, societies, cultures.

And sometimes the slowness with which the wheels of justice and compassion turn, that is enough to make us lose hope - almost.

The end of this miracle story in Luke interesting. Notice, when the people asked Jesus to leave, he did just that. Jesus got into his boat and headed back to his home, his community, his people. And when the man who claimed his somebodiness once more through the grace and power of Jesus, begged to go along with him, Jesus said no. Jesus, who repeatedly says in our scripture, follow me, come with me, this time says, no. He says to the man, “Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you.”

Could it be that Jesus is here bestowing the responsibility and authority to effect communal change on those in the community who have felt Jesus presence and power? Could it be that Jesus is saying, ‘You, who know your ‘somebodiness’ through Christ, who know the life giving, life changing power and grace of God, it is you, through your own testimony, who will bring change.’ And for those of us who know our somebodiness through Christ and have had the privilege of not having society and the culture around us attempt to crush that God given somebodiness for generations, this charge, this responsibility is for us as well.

There is a lot happening in our nation and our world right now that could cause us to lose hope, to feel like change will never come. Cause us to say, ‘can I just get in the boat and go away with you Jesus?’ Gun control. LGBTQ+ rights, Native American rights, African American Rights. I am struggling with it. I know you are too.

The strong words of Paul to the Galatians help me. The story of Legion in Luke’s gospel helps me. We don’t know what happened to Legion after Jesus sent him home. I imagine he took that ‘somebodiness’ that Jesus reminded him he had to the people, so that they too could see what God is about, a constant reminder, day in

and day out, that God will not settle for ‘nobodiness’. That God is at work to bring wholeness, life and community.

“There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

May this truth bring us comfort and courage this day and always.