

Juneteenth and the cost of casting out demons

Sarah Ashley was born in Mississippi in 1846. As a child she moved to New Orleans, then to Georgia and then East Texas. She worked hard even as a young child, picking cotton and carrying hundreds of pounds of it from the field to the cotton house. Her work day began before daylight and lasted until she picked 300 pounds. Describing her life to the Federal Writers Project when she was in her 90s, she remembers never having enough to eat.

When Sarah was 19, word came via US Army troops that she was free from the hard labor, or at least free enough to be paid for it.

Sarah was born enslaved. As a young child her family was split up - two sisters and her father were sold to a slaveholder in Georgia while she was sent to another slaveholder in Louisiana. She remembered being terrified.

As a teenager, she was sold again and came to a cotton plantation in Texas. She remembers that when freedom came her enslaver didn't like it. He offered to let her and the others stay and work for pay, so she did that for a year. But he never paid them.

Cotton farming relied on the free labor of slavery to create enormous wealth for a few. Once that free labor was gone, the economics shifted utterly. It must have felt to plantation and business owners that their way of life had run off a cliff and into a lake like demon-possessed pigs. What freed others cost them dearly.

And in that cost, the cost of redemption, I see a common theme between the story of a demon-possessed man whom Jesus freed and that of Sarah Ashley and others who were finally released from slavery on that first Juneteenth in 1865.

Both of them were treated as less than human.

He did not live in human community, he lived among the dead in the graveyard.

Sarah was, in the eyes of those who controlled her, not fully human either. She was counted as only 3/5 of a person on the census. She had no right to marry or even to her own children.

Both of them were enslaved.

He was possessed by unclean spirits.

She was possessed by racism and economic exploitation.

Both of them needed intervention to be released from captivity and freed from abuse. They needed intercession to become fully the persons God created them to be.

One of the things we learn from the story of the demon-possessed man is that when Jesus offered healing there were often consequences beyond the person who was saved. Those consequences could be uncomfortable.

The people of the city knew the man who lived in the graveyard and they expected the worst from him. When they saw him sitting calmly with Jesus in his right mind, they were terrified. Not grateful or curious. Terrified. They had known him as a crazed and possibly dangerous man and they had built up a whole system of accommodation to keep him separated from their comfortable life. As long as he stayed in the graveyard and didn't bother them, they could go about their business. I wonder what frightened them so much about his healing?

It no doubt had a lot to do with the fact that his healing cost them. His demons entered their swine and caused them to die. His salvation cost them real money. Faced with the miracle of one man freed by Jesus and their economic security, the people of the city chose the latter. They asked Jesus to leave.

Likewise, when Sarah and all the other slaves in America were freed, plantation and business owners saw their profitable businesses crash. Once the demon of slavery was gone, the economics of cotton farming and many other businesses changed completely. Fairness usually doesn't feel good to people who have been cheating.

The social consequences of being rescued from any kind of enslavement can sound unfair to us, as they certainly did to the Gerasenes and to the people of the Southern states. It is not just the rescued one whose life changes. The costs of salvation are real. When you build an empire or a city or a farm or a family on a foundation of exclusion, exploitation, and other kinds of sin, the removal of that foundation will feel unstable.

Most of us probably know this from our own lives. In our communities and our families, we know people who have been enslaved to addiction or mental illness or racism or greed or any number of other demonic forces. We rely on systems in our communities that make our lives easier at the expense of others. We have found ways to accommodate those situations, those demons.

Like the Gerasenes and the people in slaveholding cultures, we come to depend on some people being regarded as less than human so that the rest of us can feel like more. Their healing can feel like our loss.

- When poor people start getting fair wages, it feels expensive to us.
- When disabled people start gaining access to buildings and services and education and jobs it can feel inconvenient to us.
- When violence is no longer hidden but visible on our screens, it feels scary to us.
- When our collective hunger for fuel and cheap goods contributes to wars and environmental disasters, we begin to fear the people whose lives are harmed by our greed.

And when people are restored, are healed, are saved - we have to reckon with the consequences of that shift. We have to learn to live with the fact that some of the things that keep us comfortable are demons.

Juneteenth is not only significant for what happened way back in 1865. It is still significant today because it reminds us every year that change is possible. This holiday is how we hold ourselves accountable for the ways in which the promise of emancipation is still not fully realized. It holds us accountable to live into that promise.

One of the memories repeated across dozens of stories from freed slaves was hearing their enslavers say: "You are now as free as I am." We know from history that even as slave holders uttered that phrase, the brutality of racism had not ended. Formerly enslaved people were oppressed in new ways - poverty wages, poor education, no access to the voting booth, savage violence. Faced with the miracle of people restored to full humanity and their own economic security, many chose and still choose their own economic security. In a way, they are asking Jesus to leave town.

And yet - "you are as free as I am" - is a promise we still hold before us. It is the promise we have made to ourselves as a community that we will honor the full humanity of everyone.

Later this summer, the Episcopal Church will vote at our General Convention on making Juneteenth a feast day of the church, because it reminds us of the link between our baptismal vows and our history. We WILL respect the dignity of every human being. That is the link between the story of one demon-possessed man's freedom and our struggles for freedom today.

The freedom Jesus brings us - from demons, from hatred, from all the forces that divide us also brings upheaval. This has been true for every generation of Jesus' followers. We may prefer the comfort of the ways we are accustomed to.

But it is on the other side of the upheaval where we find restoration that Jesus brings.

Let us pray.

Almighty and most loving God, through your Son Jesus, who came among us as a slave choosing rather to serve his disciples than to be served by them; help us in our weakness not to seek to oppress others, nor to make peace with any form of exploitation, but in all things earnestly and of our own free will to seek to serve each other following Christ's good example, this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.