

Title: A Fuller Expression of Freedom
Date: 6/26/2022 (Proper 8, Year C)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14](#); [Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20](#); [Galatians 5:1,13-25](#); [Luke 9:51-62](#)
Video Link: N/A

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal 5:1)
Amen.

On the Sunday between Juneteenth and the Fourth of July, we get Paul's meditation on freedom.

On July 4, 1776, American colonists asserted their right to freedom from tyranny. Eighty-nine years later, on June 19, 1865, our country was reminded that that vision of freedom did not include everyone in the country. Again and again, throughout American history, we would be reminded of how narrow that original vision was, as subsequent generations worked to bring that vision to its fulfillment.

The colonists had a very specific picture when it came to defining who was free and who was biologically equipped to handle the rights and responsibilities of freedom. Spoiler alert: as a woman and a non-white person, they would have considered me poorly equipped to vote, let alone qualified to stand in a pulpit and preach.

The fact that I am standing in this pulpit speaks to how far The Episcopal Church has come. Over time, it has gradually broadened its vision of what a priest looks like.

The first African American priest, Absalom Jones, was ordained in 1802,¹ but in exchange the bishop demanded that his church agree not to send representatives to diocesan convention.² They would not have voice or vote in churchwide matters. In 1976, the General Convention of the Episcopal Church officially approved the ordination of women as priests and bishops. This came two years after three bishops claimed "obedience to the Spirit" as the reason they ordained 11 women in Philadelphia.³

In 1994, General Convention voted to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, opening the way for openly gay people to be ordained priests. In 2012, General Convention voted to prohibit discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression, affirming the ordination of trans and nonbinary people. There were already gay and lesbian and transgender priests and deacons by the time these resolutions were passed, but without a churchwide resolution, they would have the right to be ordained in some dioceses but not in others, at least on paper. Then in the summer of 2015, General Convention voted to open up the rite of Holy Matrimony to same-sex couples.⁴

Stepping back, we can see that each of these votes took place against the larger backdrop of cultural changes in our society, changes in understanding, and changes in acceptance.

At the same time, each of these changes were hard fought and hard won. Those who advocated for these changes to church law AND those who advocated against them were ALL deeply faithful people.

They all wanted the church to stay true to Scripture. And since they are Episcopalians, staying true to Scripture means reading and understanding it in the context of tradition, reason and experience. Some say these changes happened too quickly, others say they happened too slowly, but it would be hard to claim that they were undertaken lightly.

General Convention is made up of two houses, the House of Bishops and the House of Deputies. The House of Bishops is made up of all current and former bishops. Every diocese elects and sends four lay deputies and four clergy deputies to the House of Deputies. It meets every three years, except last year's. It's postponed to July 8-11 of this year, moved and shortened due to COVID.

To be clear, even when General Convention has voted on something, by no means does this mean our entire church is on the same page. But for a body as big and complex as General Convention to vote on and approve these changes to guidelines around issues such as ordination and marriage, the proposed resolutions had to go through a whole lot of study, a whole lot of committees, and a whole lot of prayer.

So, when we read the statements issued by leaders in our church on the Supreme Court's decision on *Dobbs vs. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, whether it's Presiding Bishop Michael Curry,⁵ our bishop, Andy Doyle,⁶ or Cynthia Kittredge, the dean and president of the Seminary of Southwest, all of them draw heavily on the history of statements made by General Convention.

Those statements take both a theological approach and a pastoral approach. This is what we believe, and this is what it means to live out these beliefs when it comes to making decisions in daily life.

General Convention has affirmed that "All human life is sacred. Hence, it is sacred from its inception until death. The Church takes seriously its obligation to help form the consciences of its members concerning this sacredness."⁷

General Convention has also declared "that equitable access to women's health care, including women's reproductive health care, is an integral part of a woman's struggle to assert her dignity and worth as a human being."⁸

As Dean Kittredge reminds us, "Religious traditions bring moral and spiritual perspectives to this issue that are wider than the legal and constitutional questions."⁹

Just as Elisha parted the waters in front of him with the mantle of Elijah, we too take up the mantle of those who have come before us. We do not part the waters before us by means of our own power. We are not the first generation to wrestle with the matters of reproductive rights, with gender, with sexuality, with race and the ways in which these identity markers intersect and influence people's lived experience and the way they are

treated. We are not the first generation struggling to reconcile the vision of who we have been with the vision of who God is calling us to be.

This takes us back to Paul's letter to the Galatians. "For freedom Christ has set us free." We have been set free. For what? For freedom. Freedom for what? To become slaves to one another through love; to obey the commandment to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. It sounds ironic; we have been set free so that we can obey God and make this commitment to one another.

But it's only ironic if we don't realize that we were enslaved in the first place. When we were in bondage to sin, we could not live by the Spirit. When we were focused on ourselves and our own point of view, not only did we not love our neighbors as ourselves, we picked and chose who we saw as our neighbors.

Since sin separates us from God and causes divisions between us and our neighbors, when Christ set us free from sin, we were free to obey God. This means to really **really** listen to God. We were free to put our focus on others and expanding and deepening our understanding, we listened to listen, not to prove ourselves right. This helps us begin to repair the ruptured relationship between us and our neighbors, in both a personal and a historical context.

Sometimes it's easy to tell what we are enslaved to, it's just a matter of being honest with ourselves about our desires and priorities. But in today's gospel reading, one man wants to bury his father before following Jesus, and another wants to say farewell to those at home. These sound like reasonable requests; these are time-honored familial and cultural norms.¹⁰

But when time is short, when it is near the time for Jesus to be taken up, these choices take on a different weight, a different meaning. They are reasonable excuses, but they are still excuses for not immediately going where Jesus calls us to go.

In my experience, the folks on the margins are often the ones asked to be patient, to wait. What should they wait for? For things to be done the "right" way, which is really the accepted way, the way things have been done in the past. But that is the way that has placed limits on the freedom to vote, the freedom to choose one's partner, the freedom to express one's gender identity, and the freedom to decide what happens in and to one's body.

Choosing a different way can feel like James and John wanting to burn down the Samaritan village that rejected Jesus, when it's more like shaking the dust from our eyes so that we can see more clearly. I don't know what the new way looks like, but I know it leads to a fuller expression of freedom, a fuller expression of love for our neighbors.

My first year in Chicago, I remember looking around my Fresh Start cohort in Chicago, which was made up of other priests who were recently ordained. Suddenly, it struck me that **none of us**, between our genders and ethnicities and sexualities, could have been ordained in the earliest days of The Episcopal Church. The more fully the church

commits to the freedom of all of God's people, the more the church commits to following the way of those who have been at the margins, the closer we will come to taking actions that make real God's vision for God's creation and God's children.

Amen.

¹ <https://episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/exhibits/show/leadership/clergy/jones>

² <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2014/02/13/absalom-jones-vibrancy-lives-on-at-st-thomas-philadelphia/>

³ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/ordination-of-women/>

⁴ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/who-we-are/lgbtq/history/>

⁵ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/publicaffairs/statement-on-supreme-court-dobbs-decision-by-presiding-bishop-michael-curry/>

⁶ <https://twitter.com/TexasBishop>

⁷ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ogr/summary-of-general-convention-resolutions-on-abortion-and-womens-reproductive-health/>

⁸ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/ogr/summary-of-general-convention-resolutions-on-abortion-and-womens-reproductive-health/>

⁹ <https://ssw.edu/statement-on-roe-v-wade/>

¹⁰ Heath, E. A. (2010). [Theological Perspective on Luke 9:51–62](#). In D. L. Bartlett & B. B. Taylor (Eds.), *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C* (Vol. 3, p. 194). Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.