



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

"Seriously? Jubilee"

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church
On Juneteenth, 2022, Juneteenth Sunday, from Psalm 69 & Matthew 15*

"A free bird leaps on the back of the wind and floats downstream till the current ends and dips his wing in the orange sun rays and dares to claim the sky. But a bird that stalks down his narrow cage can seldom see through his bars of rage; his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing. The caged bird sings with a fearful trill of things unknown but longed for still, and his tune is heard on the distant hill for the caged bird sings of freedom. The free bird thinks of another breeze and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn, and he names the sky his own. But a caged bird stands on the grave of dreams, his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream, his wings are clipped and his feet are tied so he opens his throat to sing. The caged bird sings with a fearful trill of things unknown but longed for still, and his tune is heard on the distant hill for the caged bird sings of freedom."ⁱ

These beautiful words by Maya Angelou always come to my mind around this time of year as we move into our yearly summer season of independence and emancipation when our nation observes successive holidays of freedom—Memorial Day, the festival of Juneteenth we celebrate today and later the 4th and the 5th of July. Today is Juneteenth, the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the end of slavery. African Americans have been celebrating their freedom on Juneteenth since 1865, when Union General Gordon Granger announced General Order No. 3 proclaiming the emancipation of enslaved people in Texas; the last state in the Confederacy still refusing to grant people freedom. Over the last 157 years, African Americans have celebrated Juneteenth with worship services, public readings of the Emancipation Proclamation, music, dancing, cookouts, street fairs, rodeos, family reunions, park parties, and blues festivals. However, it was only last year in 2021 that Juneteenth became a federally recognized holiday.

Our Church recognizes federal holidays, which means we close our offices and give all the employees on our campus the day off. Last year was the first time we observed Juneteenth as a federal holiday, which means it is a "new holiday" for a certain segment of our population. So perhaps that is why, this week, a white man in our community took it upon himself to vandalize the signs we put up about Juneteenth inside the Cornwell Center; signs posted to let our members know the center would be closed on Monday to observe the holiday. These Juneteenth signs portray an image of three Women of Color and the vandal took a red marker and wrote, "SERIOUSLY?" in all capital letters across the sign, with a question mark at the end. He did not wait to talk to our director about the sign, so we can only infer he meant this as a rhetorical question.



Engaging in dialogue or seeking understand were not his intention. Writing “SERIOUSLY?” in big red letters across this sign was a hostile action; a statement of opposition; a cynical wondering; a chiding gesture, as if to say, “This is ridiculous. Are you kidding me? Why are we observing Juneteenth? Why are we celebrating the end of slavery? Why are we taking the day to honor Black freedom? Seriously?” I would love nothing more than to spend the next 20 minutes answering the vandal’s question, but Maya Angelou’s words keep running around in my head; particularly the stark contrast she draws between two different birds—the caged and the free bird. This powerful metaphor depicts a contrast in their lived reality, emotions, worldview, philosophy, attention, and activities.

The free bird flies around the wind currents, feeling as though it owns the sky. The caged bird, on the other hand, can barely move in its prison. It’s angry and frustrated. Its wings are clipped, and its feet are tied together and sore. All it can do is to sing fearfully of the things it wants and does not know—of freedom. It sings for freedom and even those far off can hear its song. All the while, the free bird is focused on the breeze, the sounds of the trees, the fat worms in the ground he’s looking to eat. In the end we learn, once more, that the free bird feels as though it owns the sky. Reflecting on Angelou’s poem, one literary critic wrote, “The free bird has no need of song, but the caged bird sings because it is not free.” Seriously? Is that true? Do free birds have no need for songs?

The white man who defaced our Juneteenth sign at the Cornwell Center is like the free bird in Maya Angelou’s poem. He imagines he has no need no need for Juneteenth, no need for songs, no need for celebration, no need for cookouts, parties, or a public recitation of the emancipation proclamation. He thinks he has no need for a day off, for music and dancing, for rest and relaxation. He imagines he has no need for street fairs, rodeos, family reunions, park parties, and blues festivals. He thinks he has no need for songs because his life is a symphony. He imagines has no need for freedom because he already has it. He’s always been free. In fact, he’s been free so long he has come to imagine the celebration of someone else’s freedom is an imposition on him. “Why are we celebrating their freedom?” he wonders as if every day of the week and every year of our Lord has not been celebration of his freedom.

If we’ve lived with freedom all our lives—if we’ve grown accustomed to freedom, the celebration of the other people’s freedom can feel like oppression. Sadly, there are times when the free bird not only enjoys its freedom but seeks to silence the caged bird’s song; times when the free bird treats freedom like a scarce commodity; a zero-sum game; a limited resource; something to protect instead of share.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Then then caged bird's song becomes a threat and the free bird does what it needs to do to protect the sky it has come to believe it owns. So, the free bird rejects the caged bird's song and picks up a red marker to deface the caged bird's celebration with cynical questions like "SERIOUSLY?"—or the free bird gathers in an angry mob and assaults the US Capitol in a seditious conspiracy and violent insurrection. Free birds who have always been free, attacked our democracy, because of a misplaced fear that they were losing their freedom. As we celebrate this summer season of freedom festivals like Juneteenth, we find ourselves at a critical moment of reckoning in the history our nation and many of us are asking similar questions: How will we get past this horror? How can we heal and repair our wounds? How do we move forward as a people?

One answer might be that we all must learn to sing the caged bird's song. I refuse to agree with that literary critic who said, "the free bird has no need of song." Free birds need a song and I'm here to tell you it's not Lynyrd Skynyrd. I know some of you free birds have been thinking about it since I first said, "Free Bird." Now is the time in the sermon to let that go. The free bird needs a song and it's not Lynyrd Skynyrd—the free bird must learn to sing the caged bird's song—the caged bird's song of freedom.

Learning to sing the caged bird's song is not as easy as it seems. We can't just mouth the words of the ancient Spirituals of enslaved Africans, or sing hymns like "Lift Every Voice," or freedom songs like "I woke up with my mind set on freedom," or Gospel music. We can't just sing along to Billie Holiday, Paul Robeson, Abby Lincoln, Nina Simone, Gil Scott Heron, the Staple Singers, Odetta, Sam Cooke, Stevie Wonder, Sweet Honey in the Rock, Marvin Gaye, or Roberta Flack. We can't just memorize the lyrics to Prince, Tracy Chapman, Beyonce, Common, or India.Arie. The caged bird's song is not just a sing-along—it's a stand-a-long, it's a march-a-long, it's live-a-long. So how do we learn to sing the caged bird's song?

Our scripture today provides a one-word answer, and it is not "SERIOUSLY?" but it does start with an "S"—it is SPLACK-NIZOMAI! It's not Russian or Ukrainian, but a Greek word that is usually translated as "compassion." In English, we sanitize and sentimentalize it, but the original meaning of this Greek word describes a deeply embodied emotional experience. *Splagchnizomai* means "to have one's stomach churn and to feel one guts or insides torn apart." The word only appears eight times in the gospels, and every time it describes the feeling Jesus had when he encountered the poor, the sick, the hurting, the grieving, and the hungry. The word is never used to describe his feelings for Herod, Pilate, or Caesar, or for the Pharisees, chief priests, or scribes, or for his disciples for that matter. It is only ever used to describe Jesus' feeling for the poor, the sick, and the hungry.



Every time Jesus saw the poor, he was moved so deeply he felt profound physical and emotional pain like he was being punched in the stomach, or as his insides were being tied in knots. It wasn't pity. It was a deep empathy and intense form of compassion. It was *splagchnizomai*. The only time *splagchnizomai* is used in the gospels to describe the feelings of someone other than Jesus is when Jesus used the word himself to describe the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. When he sees his son still far off, Jesus tells us, the father was filled with *splagchnizomai* and ran out to put his arms around him and kissed him.

Today is not only Juneteenth, but also Father's Day, and we know how a father's love includes the experience of profound emotion when they see their children hurting or in pain. We cannot bear to watch our children suffer. It tears us up inside; it rips us apart; turns our stomachs inside out. But it is not just fathers, is it? Everyone who has ever watched someone they love suffer—a parent, a partner, a sister, a brother, a spouse, a friend, a grandchild, a neighbor—knows *splagchnizomai*. Ah, but the difference in Jesus, and the difference we are called to strive to take on and embody as his followers, is that Jesus did not just feel *splagchnizomai* for his own people, his own family, or his disciples. He felt it for the crowds, the poor, this sick, the hungry, the marginalized and oppressed of the world. And what got him in trouble is that he did not just feel this empathy or compassion, but he let this divine *splagchnizomai* provoke him into action—he healed the sick, he fed the hungry, he delivered people.

Theologian James Cone once wrote, "Jesus Christ is not a proposition, not a theological concept which exists merely in our heads. He is an event of freedom, a happening in the lives of oppressed people struggling for social and political freedom. Therefore, to know him is to encounter him in the history of the weak and the helpless. That is why it can be rightly said that there can be no knowledge of Jesus independent of the history and culture of the oppressed. It is impossible to interpret scripture correctly or understand Jesus unless the interpretation is done in light of the consciousness of the oppressed in their struggle for freedom."ⁱⁱ

In Matthew's gospel specifically, Jesus appears as the new Moses, who is constantly crossing over the water, entering the wilderness, feeding people, climbing up mountains, coming to liberate, and deliver the sick, the hungry, the poor and oppressed of the world—not through armed revolt or violent insurrection, but through a powerful infusion of compassion that leads to acts of feeding and healing and freedom. Jesus was always singing the caged birds song. Yet he was also always trying to teach his disciples, and the Pharisees, to embody the *splagchnizomai* that he possessed for the poor and oppressed; to discover how they too can learn how to sing the caged bird's song.



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Jesus' compassion for the sick and hungry led to something akin to a Juneteenth BBQ or better yet a fish fry, where everybody brings what they have to share, and even though it doesn't look like it's going to be enough, no one goes hungry and there are even leftovers for people to take home. But in this case, it was not a little boy who offered up his picnic basket to feed the crowd, but the disciples themselves who possessed the loaves and fishes that we're multiplied with the power of gratitude and redistributed to feed the hungry crowd. Our society seems to have figured out that celebrating freedom requires feasting. Cookouts are a common thread from Memorial Day, to Juneteenth, to the 4th of July. Even Wal-Mart tried to cash in this year by creating a 'tone deaf' Juneteenth ice cream that no one asked for. Buying ice cream isn't the way to celebrate freedom.

Free birds who want to commemorate Juneteenth might consider reparations instead of ice cream. Just as it's not enough to sing-a-long to freedom songs, it is not enough to engage in performative allyship. We also must dig deep into our souls to cultivate *splagchnizomai*, that deep empathy for others—that kind of intense compassion for the sick and hungry that turns our guts in solidarity with the oppressed. Anything that does not address the material conditions of slavery's ongoing legacy in every aspect of our society from environment to education, health care to housing, and work to wages, is not enough. It's like that prayer of blessing from Iona that is familiar to many, "Dear God, give bread to all who are hungry, and a hunger for justice to all who are fed." On Juneteenth we might pray, "Dear God, give liberation to all who are oppressed and a hunger for liberation to all who are free." Or "Dear God, give freedom to all the birds who are caged and the caged bird's song to all who are free."

Freedom has always been of critical importance to our forebearers in the Baptist tradition. Our movement began as a movement of freedom—the freedom to study the Bible on our own, the freedom to form our communities the way we desired, the freedom from domineering hierarchy and dogma, the freedom to choose when to be baptized, the freedom to believe without compulsion. These fragile freedoms, as they have been called, are the bedrock of Baptist identity, however they have been narrowly misinterpreted in an overly individualistic and libertarian way by many so-called Baptists in America as the "freedom" to say and do whatever we want, the freedom for licentiousness, the freedom to harm people, and freedom from accountability.

Yet there is vast difference between the libertarian view of freedom we saw on January 6, or in Buffalo, Uvalde, and Vestavia Hills, or the recent Southern Baptist abuse report, and truly the liberative freedom we see embodied by Jesus. Libertarian freedom says, "This is mine, my right, my property, my gun, my country, my president, my election, my power, my freedom for me and me alone, and no one ever gets to infringe upon."



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Liberative freedom, on the other hand says, "This is our freedom, our country, our life together. We need each other. We are dependent on one another. If even one of us isn't free, then none of us are free." "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. We are tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."ⁱⁱⁱ Liberative freedom says, "If you have come here to help me you're wasting your time, but if you've come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."^{iv} Libertarian freedom begins with the selfish assertion of one's own rights and privileges and cannot sustain relationships or community, but liberative freedom begins with *splagchnizomai*, a deep empathy and compassion for our fellow human beings. It is a freedom for community. The most powerful and fundamental spiritual wisdom of the universe is coming to that profound understanding of our common humanity; the undeniable reality that we are connected to each other and all living things, and our freedom and salvation are bound up together—and that is the truth that is found in a liberative perspective.

We live in an age that is severely lacking the compassion and empathy of Jesus. We are living in a drought of *splagchnizomai*. So, when people ask us, how will we get past this horror? How will we heal and repair our wounds? How do we move forward as a people? The answer is to sing the song of the caged bird. Like Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, or Joan Baez and so many of the great freedom singers throughout history, all the free birds need to learn to sing the song of the caged. We know, that learning to sing the caged bird's song will require a deep and rigorous spiritual practice to unearth the massive display of *splagchnizomai* that is needed in our society today.

But we don't have to be grandiose in our efforts. We can start small, start somewhere, start locally, start with micro *splagchnizomai*. We only need seven loaves and two fish, right? The song of the caged bird is contagious! It multiplies quickly. It spreads rapidly. It breeds collective effervescence. Sing a freedom song with conviction and people will not be able to help themselves from joining along. Because the caged bird's song is mightier than the pen, and red markers stand no chance against it!

The reason that the caged bird's song is so powerful is that freedom is the very will of God in history—from Exodus to Easter and from Pentecost to the Parousia, God is always coming in different forms "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free;" God is always singing the song of the caged bird and inviting us to learn how sing that song of freedom with her and the oppressed peoples our world until everyone is free—until even free birds are free. And God is trying to come into the world again through you and me. Because freedom is no false flag. Jubilee is no joke. Liberation is no lie. Freedom is for real. God means it, and therefore we mean it, SERIOUSLY!



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

ⁱ Maya Angelou, “Caged Bird” from *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* Copyright © 1983, Source: *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (Random House Inc., 1994)

ⁱⁱ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, (Maryknoll, Orbis: 1997), 32.

ⁱⁱⁱ MLK, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, 1963.

^{iv} Lilla Watson