

The Only Thing, Pt. 2: Power and Liberation

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Caldwell Presbyterian Church

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Text: Galatians 3:27-29, 5:2

It's not every day that one gets the chance to meet a living legend, a true American hero.

So when I heard that Congressman John Lewis would be in town for a get-out-the vote rally last week, I set aside an hour to attend. The rally was, appropriately enough, at Martin Luther King Park off Tuckaseegee Road in west Charlotte. Lewis, of course, marched with Dr. King in those years when Dr. King changed everything in America.

Congressman Lewis was beaten and bloodied helping lead the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma Alabama. He was beaten here in Rock Hill and in many other places, practicing the kind of non-violent protest that southern sheriffs with dogs and billy clubs didn't know how to handle, except through violent oppression.

His iconic role in American history explained the atmosphere in the park Thursday afternoon before the get out the vote rally. There was a buzz in the air as Americans of all kinds gathered to catch a glimpse of the man. Old and young. Parents with children. White and African-American, Latino and Indian. Some of the big shots in Charlotte and lots of every-day people there just to witness a little history.

Through a colleague in the fight for justice in Charlotte, I was permitted to meet the congressman.

"I think you knew my late father," I said, after introducing myself. "Yes, I remember Reese well. We did a lot of work together in Atlanta in the 1960s."

"Yessir," I said. "He is now in the church triumphant, but I bring you his greetings."

The congressman grinned.

"And sir," I added. "I thank God for you."

When he took the stage, his stout voice and distinct Alabama accent carried across the park as he reminded everyone of the sacred nature of the vote. The same voice that inspired rallies of people, young and old, black and white, across the south in the 1960s, the same voice that has been called the conscience of our nation that still rings out today in the halls of Congress. That same voice was as clear and thunderous as ever. I thought to myself he could probably be heard all the way uptown, even without the microphone.

Before he concluded, he quoted A. Phillip Randolph, another leader in the civil rights movement, who said so graciously and prophetically:

“We may have come to the United States in different ships, but we are all in the same boat now.”

That message of unity amid diversity is the hope and prayer of our nation, perhaps now as much as any time in our history.

We will know our next president, I pray, in two short days. The decision cannot come soon enough. But even if the candidate who is favored in the projections of the Electoral College emerges as the winner, we will wake up Wednesday morning a deeply and bitterly divided nation.

We’ve witnessed a toxic, two-year campaign that has exposed an element in America that would undermine the very pillars of our democracy. Let us all be on our knees in extra prayer that God can guide us as a people toward a wellspring of waters that quench our thirst for mutual understanding and that heal our wounds of separation.

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“We may have come to the United States in different ships, but we are all in the same boat now.”

In a sense that quote echoes the Apostle Paul in the Letter to the Galatians. Last week, I invited you into a three-week dip into that epistle in these final weeks of the Christian year before Advent begins on the last weekend of this month.

We are focused on Paul’s rather remarkable statement in the third chapter, remarkable in his day and just as remarkable in ours. In Christ, Paul said, “there is no longer Greek or Jew, slave or free, male and female,” for we are all co-inheritors of God’s unifying gift of grace.

Do you recall what the issue was in Galatians? A group of outspoken leaders had come into that first-century community with a different version of the gospel. All Gentile believers in Christ, they said, had to undergo circumcision to show their faith and how it connected to God’s first covenant with Abraham, the founder of the nation of Israel.

Paul opposed that false notion. The life and teaching, death and resurrection of Christ, Paul argued, had overcome any differences among us, for those willing to walk in the love and justice God showed us in Christ.

“The only thing” Paul said, “is faith working through love.”

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That single, crystalline statement guides our identity as Christians. It is, in effect, a personal mission statement for all who would seek to live a life that stands apart from the broken ways of the world.

But there is more to it than that, which is why I come back to this text this morning.

To understand our identity as followers of Christ, we must also understand ourselves in relation to two aspects of that life. The first is power. The second is liberation.

Let's start with power.

Each of us is on our own faith journey. Each of us is on our own road to the true fulfillment of who we are called to be in Christ. That is a journey within ourselves and a journey of who we are in relation to the world around us.

In Christ, God calls each of us to grow as agents of that only thing, "faith working through love." Each of us is endowed with specific and unique gifts to give. To be sure, Paul in Galatians is not suggesting that we must set aside our individuality. To be unified amid our diversity in Christ is not to suggest we are to be placed in some spiritual melting pot and boiled down until we are all one drab color or character.

Think about our choir. It is made of altos and sopranos, tenors and bases. Each voice is distinct. Each one valued. Each section needed to create the joyful noise they share in praise each week. It is through their practiced harmony that their song is as beautiful as it is. Each voice in its place, alongside the others, each as important as the next one. Isn't that the picture, or rather the sound, of unity amid diversity?

In Christ, we are called to work in harmony with others. But in the world, as opposed to the choir rehearsal room, we do not all start out in the same place relative to power and privilege. Each one of us has our own relationship to power. Understanding that relationship is critical to understanding who we are able to be and called to be in Christ.

Are we among the ones with the power? Or the ones without it? Do we use that power to oppress? Or are we among the oppressed?

In Galatians, Paul opposed those who wanted to assert power over the uncircumcised Gentiles. In this case, Peter and the others insisting on circumcision as prescribed by the Old Testament law represented the old, more exclusive ways, what one might say was old, traditional power.

But Christ came to transform the law, Paul argued. Christ came to eliminate the power of one group over another. Christ came as the great equalizer.

To be Christians in the world is to understand that the world is stained with power and privilege. Some are born into how the world has shaped and awarded power and privilege and some are not. Some can attain power and privilege under the right circumstances. Others, no matter how hard they work, cannot fully break the chains that hold them back, the chains of the world called racism, classism, sexism and homophobia.

You have heard my confession from this pulpit on other occasions. My journey is as a Christian who happens to be white, straight and privileged. That journey involves my understanding of my life in relation to power and privilege. You've heard about my great-great-great grandfather, who was the first white man in northeast Georgia, sent there by the governor to be an agent to the

Cherokee nation. We know the rest of the story of the Cherokees, who were forced off their native lands across the east by the U.S. government. My family's story, my story, is inevitably part of that history.

I've also told you about my great-great-grandfather, who served in the confederacy. He was said to have a body servant in the war with him, a polite way of saying he owned a slave, a human being, until the end of the war, when the servant was liberated.

Other members of my family have worked to overcome the sins of the family's past. I am part of that continuing story – and it is, quite definitely, an ongoing journey of understanding my identity in Christ, how it relates to power as the world has divided it and what that identity calls me to stand for today.

There are other forms of power, other chains. They are less visible but equally personal and equally debilitating. Chains of depression and anxiety, chains of self-doubt, chains of addiction, chains of abuse. These chains are just as strong. They can be just as limiting and imprisoning to those who are affected by them and the stigma that is associated with the invisible illnesses that mark so many in our nation.

To those who are so invisibly shackled, the identify of being “in Christ” is to be part of a people of hope, people of faith and perseverance, people whom God never leaves alone, people to whom God whispers words of comfort in that dark night of the soul that comes to all of us, whoever we are, at some time or another.

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But power and our relationship as Christians to power is only one part of the picture. In Christ, there is also the promise of liberation.

In Galatians 5, Paul urges the new believers to turn away from the false gospel of those who insisted on circumcision.

“For freedom Christ has set us free,” Paul pleads. “Stand firm, therefore, and do no submit again to the yoke of slavery.”

It is a new day, in Christ, Paul is saying. Worldly signs of difference and worldly uses and misuses of power must stand the test of what Christ did, what Christ taught, what Christ died for and the commitment to justice for the powerless that Christ modeled time and time again.

For those captive of personal affliction of circumstance, Christ has come to extend hope and healing. For those imprisoned by racism, sexism or homophobia, Christ calls his followers to work for their liberation, so that they might not ever have to submit to the yoke of that kind of slavery.

That yoke still weighs heavy, as we have heard some of our neighbors cry out in recent weeks. The yoke of schools that are divided by race and class, the yoke of police shootings, the yoke of the school-to-prison pipeline, the yoke of unequal access to economic opportunity.

Others carry their own yokes. The rejection of prejudice that comes when one is gay or lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer. The yoke of mental illness. The yoke of age-ism and the fear and uncertainty that aging brings. The yoke of poverty and how hard life is when one is poor, a yoke that some will never understand until they experience it themselves. The yoke, even, of calling oneself a Christian in a world that snickers at religion as a quaint but outdated notion.

“For freedom Christ has set us free,” Paul wrote to the Galatians and to us. “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.”

Paul says God calls out to us to be free, God yearns for us to be free of whatever imprisons us. God offers Christ as the great liberator, the great unifier, once we understand whatever power or oppression imprisons us.

Many have walked with Christ in the army of liberators. The park where I met Congressman John Lewis this week was named from one of those liberators.

Dr. King liberated African-Americans, to be sure. But he offered a much larger liberation, the liberation of a nation, the freedom to stand with the marginalized, whoever they were, to stand against the misuse of power to oppress.

In an essay, my father wrote of Dr. King as “the black emancipator of enslaved southern white folk.” Dr. King offered southern white folk liberation from their prejudice, from the toxic, soul-killing effect of what it is to be the oppressor.

This morning, as we hear the Apostle Paul’s ancient and timeless call for us to be one in Christ, we know that work is not finished. And whatever happens on Tuesday, we will wake up to a divided and hurting nation.

Let us pray that we can all continue to live into our identity in Christ. And let us pray for God’s healing and providential care for this great national experiment in democracy.

Amen