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Romans 14:1-9

Exodus 15:1-13

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WHEN THE DELIVERANCE IS NOT YET COMPLETE

General Order Number Three – that was the title of the news read aloud in Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865. That was the day that Major General Gordon Granger of the Union army arrived at that port city and shared emancipation news freeing the last of the enslaved from being considered as property. It was two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation in which President Lincoln had declared that the enslaved in the south were then free. It was two and a half months after General Lee had surrendered to end the Civil War. But such liberation news had not reached those who had been enslaved way down in Texas until the day that came to be known as Juneteenth.¹ Imagine the celebration of those who were experiencing freedom for the first time in their lives.

In our reading from the book of Exodus, we hear of another celebration of an earlier emancipation. For generations, the Hebrew people had been enslaved to the Egyptians, and finally, finally, they had been set free. It had taken a lot. Moses had been instructed by God at the burning bush to go to Pharaoh to demand that the Hebrew people be liberated. But Pharaoh was not easily convinced. Plagues that impacted the Egyptians began to occur. Several times, Pharaoh told Moses that he should take his people away and good riddance to them. But then he would change his mind. Egyptians priests prayed to each particular Egyptian god that they believed had power over a specific plague, but Moses said they would only find relief after the Hebrew people had been freed. Finally, after the tenth plague that involved an illness with many Egyptians dying, Pharaoh did allow the enslaved Hebrews to leave. They as a group, headed east, but soon, Pharaoh once again had a change of heart and he sent his army after them.

As the Hebrews were camped near a body of water, identified as the Red Sea, although that doesn't make much sense geographically, they looked back in the

direction from which they had come and saw what looked to be a dust storm approaching them. It wasn't long until they saw a large group of Egyptian chariots coming after them. They feared for their lives. But somehow, somehow - some think it was a strong wind – somehow, somehow, God's way was opened for the Hebrews to make it through the body of water as if they were walking on dry ground. The word 'exodus' means the way out. The chariots, when they tried to follow, got stuck and somehow, somehow, God made a way out of no way that day. The Hebrews' deliverance from their oppressors was complete.

That's what had happened when our reading from Exodus makes its poetic expression of the great victory. It says Moses and all the people sang their celebration. After that, Moses' sister, Miriam, grabs a tambourine and gets a lot of the Hebrew women to dance along with her in celebration. What relief! What joy! What a festive acknowledgement of God's goodness and power! Yes, they had waited a long time. Yes, it was time to celebrate.

The pandemic that we have been experiencing, that has brought death and a certain loss of freedom, doesn't compare to multiple generations of slavery in terms of oppression. But I'll say I would like to get to the time when we can celebrate our freedom from covid-19 with singing and tambourines and maybe even some dancing. We are not there yet. What do we do at this point when our deliverance is not yet complete? We pray for researchers who are working toward the development of a safe and effective vaccine. We pray for medical professionals who are treating those who are ill and we follow the guidance of and pray for public health workers who are trying to prevent the spread of the illness. We pray for those who are grieving the loss of the life of a loved one and for those who are trying to make their way forward when they have lost their livelihood. And we pray for all who are trying to navigate life with the threat of a lurking danger that doesn't have a visible dust cloud to help us recognize it.

I don't know what were General Orders number one and two on the day when General Granger is remembered for getting to share liberation news through General Order number three. But while we wait for something akin to General Order number three, I would suggest that General Order number one is to remember

that which is within our control and that which is not. We take responsibility for those actions that are within our control and then we celebrate that when there is so much beyond our control, that we can pray to the One who can liberate us from our anxieties while we await a greater liberation from the pandemic.

And General Order number two needs to focus on how to get along with one another in the meantime. That is what the Apostle Paul is writing about in our reading today from the letter to the church in Rome. They lived in a place where the bodies of animals were offered to various gods in a pagan temple, but only part of the carcass was burned in that expression. The remainder of the meat was sent to the market to be sold. Some Christians thought there was nothing wrong with eating meat that had been offered to Roman gods because they viewed those gods as not being real, thus being powerless to exert influence over their lives. Others refrained from buying and consuming such meat as an issue of conscience. It mattered little one way or the other until those with varying beliefs and practices got into fights with one another, assuming that God only welcomed the ones who agreed with their own group. There are those who eat meat and those who do not these days, but the reason for such practices are different today. And, of course, there are those within our faith community who may disagree with one another about political matters or theological issues. But as we await liberation from the pandemic and its effects, God can liberate us from dysfunction as a family of faith by acknowledging that our differences from one another are not stronger than our love for one another.

The particular issue of disagreement that came to my mind upon reading the passage from Romans had to do with those who diligently wear masks around each other and those who choose not to do so. Some might suggest that Paul's words could be applied here, that each person ought to be free to follow their convictions of conscience in such practices. However, as our congregation resumes in-person outdoor worship next week at our 8 a.m. service, where we will require all who attend to wear a mask, I want to point out a significant difference here. Those who were making choices about eating meat or abstaining from it in Paul's day were not putting anyone else at risk by their choices. Those who choose not to wear masks around others during the midst of this pandemic are potentially putting others at

risk. So if General Order number one is to remember that which is within our control, and General Order number two is to get along with each other by showing care for one another, then wearing masks while in proximity to others gives us all a greater chance to be around and wanting to celebrate together when some future General Order number three announces our liberation from this pandemic. Even now, as our deliverance is not yet complete, there is reason to celebrate the liberating God who is with us in our period of struggle as we live in this time where hope and prayers can sustain us. There is also reason to celebrate the liberating God who has called us together to be a faith community that shows love for one another even when we might at times disagree with one another. And we celebrate even now the liberating God who we count on somehow, someway to make a new exodus, a new way out for everyone to be freed from the threat and impact of the current pandemic. Someday there will be singing and tambourines and dancing. But we can begin to experience God's liberation even as we wait, and that, my friends, is worth celebrating now. Thanks be unto God. Amen.

¹ <https://www.juneteenth.com/history.htm>