

SERMON OF JUNE 19, 2022 – ANDRIS BERRY

Stony The Road We Trod John 14: 15-17, 25-27, Romans 8: 14-17

1. Juneteenth

Today we celebrate Juneteenth, our newest national holiday. It commemorates the day when news of their freedom finally reached the freed slaves in Texas, two years after President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. It is a day of celebrating the good news finally reaching the people. You see, the slaves were already free, they just didn't know it. The story had not yet reached them.

2. Pentecost

We are now in the season of Pentecost, a time when we also celebrate the good news. Jesus gave us the promise of the Holy Spirit of Truth being with us forever. On Pentecost the apostles received the Holy Spirit. From that time on, it was a matter of spreading the good news, and letting the people of the world know that they were no longer in bondage to the corrupt systems of the world. The good news that we are all children of God was to be spread over the earth. The story of Jesus, the story of liberation from earthy bondage, was to transform the world.

3. Bidy Mason Story

In the spirit of this day, I want to share with you one of my favorite stories. It is about a woman named Bidy Mason. I first learned about Bidy Mason while I was working on a commercial in downtown Los Angeles. (I used to make commercials for a living) There is a little park in downtown L.A. named for her. Bidy Mason was born into slavery in Georgia in 1818. When she was a very little girl, she was taken from her mother and sold or given or perhaps traded for a sack of tobacco to a slave owner who took her to Mississippi. There, Bidy was raised by the other slaves. She learned how to cook, clean, mend and do all sorts of work. She was not taught how to read or write, but she learned how to heal people. She learned a lot from native people living nearby. She could make medicines and treat fevers and used her skills to help sick people, both black, white and native.

When she was 18 years old, Bidy was given as a wedding present to Robert and Rebecca Smith. Bidy spent a lot of time caring for Rebecca who was sickly. When Bidy turned thirty, Robert Smith converted to Mormonism and decided to move his household to Utah. Bidy had three daughters by this time, (two of them most likely were fathered by Robert Smith). The Smiths and their retinue embarked on a 2,000-mile, seven-month journey. There were covered wagons pulled by teams of mules and oxen, which carried the household goods. Bidy walked the entire way, carrying her youngest child while her other two daughters walked beside her. Along the way, Bidy cared for the Smith children and her own, she tended to Mrs. Smith. She made all the meals for the family, she milked the cows and tended the teams of mule and ox. It was a harsh journey, cold and wet and muddy for the eastern leg and hot and parched as they went farther west. It was a stony road for sure at a time when there were no paved roads going west.

When they got to Utah, the Smith family settled for a time, but then decided to move on to California instead. Again, Bidy and her daughters went on foot beside the covered wagons of the Smith family. When they got to California in 1851, life resumed as it had before for Bidy with her caring for the needs of the people around her. She took her daughters into the San Bernardino mountains and taught them how to collect healing herbs as she had been taught back in Mississippi. California had only recently become a state, and it was a free state. There, Bidy met free black people who told her that she too could be free. She and the other slaves in the Smith household began to talk about freedom. When Mr. Smith got wind of this, he made plans to move his household to Texas. He didn't want to lose Bidy and his other slaves. On their way to Texas, they camped in the Santa Monica mountains just outside of Los Angeles. Bidy's friends found out what was going on and went to the Los Angeles County Sheriff, who rode out and accused Smith of trying to "persuade persons of color to go out of the State of California." The sheriff took Bidy and the other slaves into custody and held them in jail "for their own protection" until they could go to court.

In court, Bidy was not allowed to speak, because she was black. But the judge knew that Smith was probably going to Texas to sell his slaves. The judge ruled that Bidy and the other 13 slaves in the Smith household were "entitled to their freedom and free forever." He then ordered Smith to pay all the court costs. So, Smith fled California, without paying the court costs, but also without his slaves.

What happened next is simply wonderful. Bidy got a job as a midwife and nurse. She saved every penny she could and she treated every person who needed help, black, white, Mexican, Indian, rich and poor. She treated people in the county hospital and the county jail. She walked everywhere to save money. She bought herself a home and some land. Over time, she became a landlord and sold property and became one of the wealthiest women in southern California. She helped found the first African Methodist Episcopal Church in Los Angeles and when disaster struck L.A. in the form of floods, her donations kept several churches from having to shut their doors. She was an amazing person and I could go on about her achievements, for there are many. Her descendants still live in and around Los Angeles. She passed down to them this saying: **"If you hold your hand closed, nothing good can come in. The open hand is blessed, for it gives in abundance, even as it receives."**

But what amazes me so much about Bidy Mason and why she is one of my heroes is that she walked in the Spirit of Truth. Even as a slave, living as the lowest member of society in an oppressive system, she behaved as if she was free. Like Joseph in Pharaoh's prison, her spirit was never in bondage. She helped people of all walks when she was a slave and did the same when she claimed her freedom under the law. How many people today can we point to that are as free as Bidy Mason?

4. Children of God

Now I want to talk about freedom in the world today. Today is Father's Day and we celebrate our earthly fathers. But we know from scripture that we are children of God. We have an earthly nature and a spiritual nature. We are called to honor our spiritual nature by following Jesus as we walk through this world. When we love Jesus and follow Him, we receive the

Holy Spirit of Truth. It was the Spirit of Truth that Bidy Mason walked in that really made her free.

5. World system of power

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says the world cannot receive the Spirit of Truth because it does not see Him or know Him. What does this mean? The word for world, *kosmos* in Greek, in this context refers to the worldly systems of power, such as we might describe when talking about the “world of politics,” or the “world of social media,” or the “world of sports.” To the worldly systems of power and domination and enslavement, the Spirit of Truth is alien. The worldly systems do not operate on the basis of love and service to the God of eternity. They operate on the basis of self-service and the temporal quest for more. They use whatever is available to them for acquisition and gain. Worldly systems can be empires, religions, corporations, or any system of power really. They may even start out serving a good mission, but they also may, and often do, become corrupted. They keep a closed hand, even using what is good towards self-serving ends. The worldly powers profit from the enslavement of the body, but if that is not possible, they profit from the enslavement of the mind.

6. Torches of Freedom

Let me illustrate with a story from the world of advertising and public relations. The women’s suffrage movement was going on in the early 1900s. It was a time of struggle for gender equality. Women were marching for the right to vote and the right to equality. Edward Bernays, a public relations expert, organized a march in New York City in which women would light their “torches of freedom.” It sounded festive, positive and righteous. When the march occurred, women lit cigarettes. These were their so-called torches of freedom. It was a time when smoking in public was a taboo for women, so the gesture of smoking in public was a show of defiance to the male dominated social norms. What the women did not know was that Edward Bernays, the march organizer, was hired by the Lucky Strike cigarette company to expand their market to include not just men, but women also. Bernays harnessed the gender equality issue to get more women smoking. How many women became addicted to smoking because it was associated with liberation? How many of them died from lung cancer? We will never know. But it is easy to see how world systems can put us into bondage even when we march for liberty. This is the enslavement of our times. This is our stony road. And it is very difficult to discern.

7. Current bondage system — false stories we believe

We live in a time when slavery, in a technical, physical sense, is abhorrent. None of us have been subjected to actual slavery, thank God. We learn about it through books and stories, but are unable to see it all around us, unable to recognize when we and our neighbors are not free. I have worked in Hollywood for many years and witnessed the spirit of deception first hand, behind the scenes. I tell you, we are still in bondage, but know it not. That is the trick of the modern systems of power. They deceive us into thinking we are free, manipulating us all the while.

If you think that we are free, remember that we just spent nearly two years locked out of our jobs, our churches and our schools. This disproportionately affected the poor, the young and

the mentally unstable. But we are told that it saves lives — **and we believe that story**. Our tax money goes towards weapons of war each year that kill untold numbers of people, most of them poor, in countries like Yemen and Syria and Ukraine and Iraq. But we are told that there is such a thing as a just war — **and we believe that story**. We are told to fear death of the physical body, forgetting all about our spiritual body — **and we believe that story**. We put our trust in scientists, politicians and media personalities — **and we believe their stories** instead of putting our trust first in God. Without following Jesus, without putting our trust in God, we are at the mercy of the worldly systems and the stories they tell — those very systems that cannot and will not recognize the Spirit of Truth.

8. The Good News

The systems of the world seek to capture and confuse us. If you cannot be enslaved by law, it finds other ways —telling you stories to hook you onto substances or fear, or they hide the truth about your rights under the law. World systems of power alter our perceptions of what is right, good and desirable. They take women marching for liberty and turn them into addicts. They take peaceful people and get them to support war. They take healthy people and make them afraid to live. It happens in countless other ways. Where is this happening in your life? We are all vulnerable to these deceptions. Don't be fooled. Don't let the powers of this world corrupt your heart. This is why we must cling to Jesus' Way like a life-line on a stony and treacherous path. Bob Dylan writes: **“the enemy is subtle, albeit we are deceived, when the truth's in our hearts, but we still don't believe.”**

The message in today's Gospel is that we are already free. Remember the reading from Romans: **“All those who are led by the Holy Spirit are sons (and daughters) of God. You should not act like people who are owned by someone. They are always afraid. Instead, the Holy Spirit makes us His sons (and daughters), and we can call to Him, “My Father.””**

We all walk a stony road, whether we know it or not. We live in a world where the powers of domination tax us and try to enslave us to fears and desires for things. We are like people who don't yet know the good news of their emancipation. Know that the price has already been paid for our freedom. We just have to claim it. Don't be fooled. Biddy Mason wasn't fooled. She lived like a free person even before she was free by law. She lived with an open hand, helping all who needed it. This world could not enslave her spirit. May the Holy Spirit of Truth make your spirit free and be with you as you follow Jesus' Way. Amen

PRAYER OF PASTORAL CARE June 19, 2022 – REV. SKIP DICKINSON

We pray now for all the world, the church, people of faith, and those living in want, saying God in your mercy, **hear our prayer**.

God of leaders, prophets, children, and all in need, we give you thanks for the breath of life you pour into the living and into all of us when we are in trouble. Bless your world in times of struggle and days of rejoicing. Make us one with you and one another. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer**.

We thank you for your care of the earth, especially for rain and sun, for the flowers that give pollen to bees, for fish in all their shapes and colors, and for the shelter we find underneath your trees. Let all creation praise your name. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the church, that fellowship in this congregation, and in the families of faith in all lands, may give us both comfort and challenge. Make us able to rejoice with people of other faiths that Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and others may speak kindly of one another and work together in your world. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for people everywhere to take courage, especially this day the people of Afghanistan, and in Ukraine, and for all peoples of our world in crises of living and safety. We pray for all refugees and for all who face uncertain futures. Use each of us, we pray, as partners of your justice and peace. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for widows, widowers, divorced parents, children, orphans, for all who live alone, for all who live in difficult family situations, for families of origin and families formed by friendship, that they find love in community and comfort in you. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for all in any need: for those enduring cancer treatments, those awaiting and recovering from surgery, for those reshaping their lives from tornadoes, wild-fires, and floods; for people who have no food, no work, no self-respect, and for those we name now in our own hearts... *[silence]*. God, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We now lift before you those on this church's immediate needs list:

We place in your safekeeping all for whom we pray, trusting that in your wisdom, the needs of all, and of creation will be met. In Jesus' name. Amen.

OFFERING God sustains us for our journey of faith. Let us give so that others may know their blessings and give thanks to God.

***DOXOLOGY**

***PRAYER** O God, make us grateful every day for the privilege of giving for the well-being of all your world. Be with us in all stony roads we tread. Amen.