

“Speaking of Freedom”

**A Letter to the Church from Kelly Brown Douglas, Stephanie Spellers and Winnie Varghese
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Video of letter-reading and author conversation: <https://www.facebook.com/winnievarghese/videos/10157174664751437>

Video of letter-reading: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WX94bgC7dBM>

On this day, July 4th, our country celebrates its Independence. Our Episcopal Church also marks this as a major Feast Day, a day to pray in thanksgiving for the founders who “won liberty for themselves and for us, and lit the torch of freedom for nations then unborn.”

Yet, we must ask what is the meaning of freedom in such a time as this, when the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately ravages Black, Brown and First Nations communities suffering the pre-existing conditions of injustice and inequality? What is the meaning of freedom, when Black bodies continue to be brutalized by policing that has its roots in slave patrols? What is freedom when our Breonnas are not safe in their homes, our Ahmauds are not safe jogging, and our Erics, Elijahs and Georges cry out, “I can’t breathe”?

For the church, freedom must be more than a song we sing or a flag we wave. It must begin with the cross that calls us to claim freedom – and to free our church and nation – from America’s original sin: White supremacy. We long for the day that our church might be free to become what we have until now only aspired to be: a true church following a crucified and risen Lord and witnessing to God’s just future.

And so we write this day, three women, three Episcopal priests, two of African descent, one South Indian, reflecting on what freedom means. We are fueled by a shared hope that our Episcopal Church can indeed live into what it means to be church and thus lead the nation into what it means to be truly free.

What Does Freedom Mean to Us?

Freedom means transformative truth-telling. Truth-telling like this is not about self-serving admissions of guilt, to be followed by exoneration from an inhumane past. Transformative truth-telling takes responsibility for that past. This means naming the ways the church has been shaped by and continues to benefit from the complex realities of White supremacy – and then doing that which is necessary systemically, culturally and theologically to free the church from its sin.

Frederick Douglass spoke the truth about American Christianity in 1852, when he said in his “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” address:

A worship that can be conducted by persons who refuse to give shelter to the houseless, to give bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and who enjoy obedience to a law forbidding these acts of mercy, is a curse, not a blessing to mankind. ... The church of this country is not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave, it actually takes sides with the oppressors.

His words have shocking resonance today, particularly for Episcopalians. That is why, from sea to shining sea, we must tell the truth of our story as the church of wealthy slaveholders and traders. We must speak of Episcopalians who were personally responsible for the forced migration and extermination of Native peoples, and others who penned best-selling tracts laying out the biblical

case for slavery. We must tell the truth about congregations that advertised lynchings in their Sunday bulletins. We must speak of church support for “sundown towns”, internment camps and Asian exclusion acts. We must bring to light the sinful sources of the inherited wealth of “privileged” congregations and dioceses, resources they continue to hoard while other congregations and dioceses that serve Indigenous people, descendants of slaves and immigrants struggle to survive.

Jesus said, “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32). If we speak these unflinching truths, the church may find its way, and lead a nation that claims to trust in God.

Freedom means transformative letting-go. To let-go is to free ourselves institutionally and individually of that which stands between us and the dream of God: Whiteness itself.

Whiteness is not a benign construct. It is that which White supremacy protects. It is a culture and way of being that claims superiority and universality, even as it subjugates, appropriates, silences, deports, dehumanizes, and eliminates that which is not White.

Whiteness prevents us all from living the truth of who we are as sacred children of God. White Americans must name and let-go of the realities and privileges of Whiteness, even as People of Color must refuse the tantalizing pull to secure the privileges of Whiteness for ourselves.

Steeped as it is in White supremacy, our denomination must model transformative letting-go and decide whether it is going to be White (that is, allied with oppression) or be church. Jesus made his choice. In his crucifixion, he let-go of anything that set him apart from the crucified classes of people of his day. He understood that it is only when the least of these are able to breathe freely, that the sacred humanity of all is restored.

Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Before there is a possibility of abundant life for all, that which binds us to sin must die and be sloughed off like an old skin. We urge our White siblings to take on this life-giving work of letting-go.

Freedom means being born from above. To be born from above (John 3:3) is to hold ourselves accountable not to the way things are, but to the way God has promised us they will be: a Beloved Community marked by compassion, love and justice.

White supremacy has cast a nearly impenetrable shadow, but we cling to God’s promise. We know that in Christ whatever is broken can be restored. To be born from above, our church will need to join in reimagining and fostering new ways of being a society and a people. In this reimagined reality, the first would be last and the last first, *not* because there is a reversal of penalty and privilege, but because there is no longer last, no longer first.

Jesus’s life and mission were dedicated to this call: “to proclaim good news to the poor, ... freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18-19). To be born from above is to hear and heed his calling as our own.

Freedom means living into our Baptism. Ultimately, the way to freedom for Episcopalians is embedded in the covenant we take on and renew at Baptism.

We have promised as a church and as individual followers of Jesus to resist evil and - when we fail, for we surely will - to repent and return to our God. In this moment, we must do the institutional and personal work of transformative truth-telling and repentance. Learning from the witness of our South African and Canadian siblings, we can organize diocesan and local truth convenings that feature public storytelling and confession of the racial violence and oppression in which Episcopal churches have been complicit. As truths come to light, we can commit to change structures, behaviors and practices that participate – even unconsciously – in White supremacy.

We have promised as a church and as individual followers of Jesus to seek and serve Christ in all persons and to love our neighbors as ourselves. In this moment, we must do the life-long inner, interpersonal and institutional work of letting-go of Whiteness and instead embrace a way of life that looks like Jesus. This requires a fresh commitment to local and regional training and formation, especially in anti-racism, dismantling racism and internalized oppression. This season of disruption and displacement may be the ideal moment for us and our churches to pause, learn, reflect, let-go and reimagine life beyond Whiteness.

We have promised to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. In this moment we must do the social and structural work of justice and repair, with a special commitment to ending the brutal reign of White supremacy over Black, Brown, Native and Asian bodies. We must protest and witness against White supremacy in its many guises and invest our resources – financial, relational, political, intellectual, moral – in local, state and federal struggles to reimagine “criminal” justice. This begins with discarding a system of policing born of injustice, and promoting models that aim for community flourishing and freedom from the violence of systemic poverty and inequity. No one can claim to be free as long as these systems ruthlessly shackle, diminish and destroy the children of God.

Can a denomination steeped in White supremacy turn and dedicate its life to dismantling the very structures of death that it blessed and built? Can it become Beloved Community, where the flourishing of every person and all creation is the hope of each, where the oppressed are liberated from oppression, and oppressors are at last free of the sin that oppresses?

We believe that, with God’s help, The Episcopal Church can become an instrument not of oppression but of God’s peace. It can grow followers of Jesus who are more concerned about taking up the cross of our crucified Lord than they are about maintaining the control and privilege of a crucifying culture.

We believe that we can become the nation and church that our first Black sister priest Pauli Murray called us to be, a “true community that is based upon equality, mutuality and reciprocity ... that affirms the richness of individual diversity, as well as the common human ties that bind us together.”

As Jesus urged, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27). It is then that we will be free.