

Take Door Number Two

Psalm 89:1-4;15-18

Romans 6:15-23

Last Tuesday afternoon, an African-American demonstrator entered a restaurant on Madison, Wisconsin's Capitol Square with a megaphone and a baseball bat. Using the former, he began shouting Black Lives Matter slogans. Somebody called the police. Numerous cell phone cameras captured the arrest. Social media did its thing. When darkness fell hundreds of demonstrators appeared in the Square. The police did not show. Businesses were looted. State Senator Tim Carpenter, an openly gay Democrat there in support of BLM, was knocked to the pavement by a group of mostly Caucasian demonstrators who took turns kicking him in the head. The hospital spokeswoman reported he had a concussion, a broken eye socket and numerous abrasions "on every side and plane of his skull." Next came the statues. Among those pulled down was one of Abolitionist and Civil War hero Hans Christian Heg.

Hans Christian Heg emigrated to America from Norway with his family in 1840, when he was eleven years old. At 20 he became a "49er", going to California to pan for gold. He later returned to Wisconsin, got married and entered politics. He became a leader in the Lutheran Church. An ardent abolitionist, he briefly sheltered a fugitive white who had freed slaves in the South when a posse of rampaging slave owners who had ridden some six hundred miles tracked him down. As state Prison Commissioner he initiated reforms that created more humane conditions for African-

American inmates, who until then had languished in separate, horrid facilities. During the Civil War he was made Colonel of the 15th Wisconsin Regiment. He led his men for nearly a year, engaging in four major battles and innumerable skirmishes. He died from wounds he suffered at Chickamauga.

In other words, the mob pulled down a statue honoring an immigrant abolitionist who lived out his Christian faith more than most do. Historians argue endlessly over whether the North entered the War to restore the Union, thereby repudiating the South's doctrine of States' Rights, or to end slavery. Letters Heg wrote home to his wife make it clear he fought to free the slaves. I have never found myself in the midst of a mob. But like many of us I have read about the psychology that can develop in enraged, poorly organized masses of people. It is extremely likely the crowds in Madison neither knew nor cared who Hans Christian Heg was. They saw a statue. They took it down. More's the pity. Because our nation, at this critical juncture in our history, needs more men like Heg.

Heg believed in Jesus Christ. Heg believed his Lord commanded that no human being might enslave another. Heg put his life on the line for that belief. The Apostle Paul uses slavery to drive home his point in the sixth chapter of his Letter to the Romans. We have reached the conclusion of Paul's long argument that the grace of God makes us right with God—not obedience to God's law, as Paul's fellow Jews believed. He opens our passage with a rhetorical question: should we go on merrily sinning since we no longer are “under the law”? Scholar J. Christiaan Beker suggests

we ought to translate Paul's answer to his own question as, "Are you kidding me?!?"

Paul then dives into his discussion of slavery. Summarizing his thought, we find him saying that we become slaves to whatever—or whomever—we obey. If we insist on sinning, we become slaves to sin. If we focus on becoming "obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed," we become "slaves" of righteousness. Here Paul means that we are to seek the truth and do our best to live it out. When we do, by the freeing power of God's grace, God **sees** us as righteousness. No one is perfectly righteous, perfectly obedient, but that is no longer the point. The point now that Christ has come is that he has freed us from our inability to live out his teachings perfectly. He has freed us from our slavery to sin.

Paul has one more point to add. When enslaved to sin we were enslaved also to death. In this context he means death in every way. Death to abundant life in this world. Death to God's presence in the world to come. But now that God has freed us from sin "the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life." My Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology defines sanctification as, "the process of being made holy." When we accept God's gracious gift of freedom from sin we do not suddenly become holy as God is holy. We become *holier than we once were*. We enter a process that leads to the greatest end of all. Paul concludes: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

How do such lofty words apply to us here and now? And why do we speak of

sanctification and eternal life in the midst of the virus and the protests? We do because those lofty words belong to a systematic theology that promises life, peace, love, justice. What does our nation need more, right now, than life, peace, love, justice? The first application of today's lesson is on ourselves. We must start by checking our own relationship with Jesus Christ. Are we slaves to sin or to righteousness? Do we have living, breathing relationships with the God who loves us enough to put his own life on the line even for the likes of us?

In a sermon delivered at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in November of 1957, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction. So when Jesus says 'Love your enemies,' he is setting forth a profound and ultimately inescapable admonition." The grandson of a slave, King perfectly understood the ramifications of his words. His enemies included the descendants of those who had owned his ancestors. Many of those descendants of the owners still hated him because of his skin color. But if he was to call himself a Christian he must try to love even these enemies. If we truly are on the road of sanctification, of becoming more holy, we must ground ourselves in the love of Jesus. And we must give it even to people who despise us for whatever reason. ***Especially*** to those who despise us. And—we must be honest in times like these—we must love those whom we hate.

First we must secure our own faith in the God of love. Then we must use His Holy Spirit to empower us to love our enemies. This has always been a terribly difficult thing to do. Now, however, when most of us carry with us everywhere a device that can fan the flames of

our hatred, a cell phone connected to social media, the call upon our lives stands, and it stands as an even tougher call to answer. But try we must, and the first step in our trying is making a choice. We must choose Door Number Two. The schlocky television show Let's Make a Deal often uses the device of two or three doors. A contestant must choose one before learning what lies behind it. Sometimes they choose doors that open to reveal a cruise or a car, sometimes a big, fat nothing. Sometimes we may feel that we do not know what lies behind the doors we face. In reality, we do know. Paul writes of two choices. We can choose to remain slaves to sin, or we can become slaves to righteousness. Choose Door Number Two. Become a slave to righteousness.

I recognize that slavery imagery is highly problematic just now. Yet as our Bible passage uses it, so I, as a preacher, must speak to it. Choose righteousness. Give yourself over to the pursuit of obedience to God, using the power of God, to become more holy. Doing so empowers us to love even our enemies. These times demand that we make this decision. Our faith, our Christianity, demands that we make this decision. Certainly other sources of goodness that can defeat evil exist, as Gandhi proved in India. But the love of Jesus Christ is the source we have been given. Let us use it.

The Rev. Paul Miller pastored the First Presbyterian Church of Bloomington, Indiana from 1966 to 1975. I heard him preach many sermons and profited spiritually and intellectually for it. After I entered seminary, he looked me up on a visit to campus. (He had studied there as well.) Over coffee I made some comment about how stirring it must have been to preach during the Civil Rights demonstrations, the riots, the Vietnam war and all the rest. "It was exhausting," he replied. I now understand what he meant. Finding the right scriptural concepts, and the words to express them accurately, is more difficult—and more

critical—these days. I thank you for your prayers and your listening ears.

God has called us into obedience, to make the love of Christ tangible in the midst of a pandemic and racial tension. How you do this will depend on your gifts and your heart. I find myself absorbed with providing pastoral care while at social distance, and with providing the best worship services we can. But I cannot escape the nagging call to become active in racial reconciliation in Terre Haute. I have reached out to an African-American colleague at another church in town. His initial reaction was he wished we had reached out to each other long ago. Then we each spoke of how busy we are. Then we made a vague plan to talk again. I think it's time for me to use my cell phone for something redemptive, instead of tweeting.

How might you choose Door Number Two? How might you obey the call to make the love of Christ real in tough times? A few possible answers: parents not only teaching their children to love all, but actively seeking to connect them with children of other skin colors; joining in peaceful demonstrations to add to their momentum, and to show solidarity with those whose ancestors experienced literal slavery; personally serving the poor with more than a donation (though donations work, too). Whatever you choose to do, remember it starts with one fundamental choice. Choose righteousness. Let the power of God dwell in your heart and mind, that you might find the courage to stick your neck out a little farther than you have ever before, and all that we might bring the love of Christ to bear on the truly momentous challenges now facing our nation. This is the one, true, **Christian** response to them.

As in Let's Make a Deal, not choosing is not an option. Why not, then, make the hard but loving choice? Choose love. Choose reconciliation. Choose hope. Choose justice. Choose Jesus Christ.