

**October 18, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service**

**TEXT: [Ephesians 6:5–9](#)**

**TITLE: Redeeming Language**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

There are 66 books in the bible and every Sunday we include a couple passages in our worship services. But even if you came to church every week for years and years, there is still a lot of the bible you will never hear read in church. Part of the reason for this is that we like certain stories better than others. We re-tell the birth of Jesus every Christmas and we remember the death and resurrection of Christ every Easter. We like the gospel parables better than the warnings of the prophets, Paul's letters better than the laws of Leviticus, the poetry of the psalms better than the moralizing of Proverbs.

Another reason is the age of the scriptures. Since it was written thousands of years ago, some passages are just awkward to read; the language is outdated, the analogies are obscure. This is true for an entire section of chapter 6 of Paul's letter to the Ephesians—the passage known as the “household code.” Here Paul talks about husbands and wives, children and parents, and slaves and masters. In this year of 2020 to say “Slaves, obey your earthly masters” just sounds wrong and jarring to our souls. You can try and find another way to translate the Greek, using servant or worker instead of slave. You can halfheartedly insist that slavery back in Greco-Roman days was different from slavery in America, even though it really wasn't. In the end, we usually choose to avoid the passage altogether—knowing, though, that this painful language is still a part of our bible and verses like these have been used to oppress people for centuries in the name of God.

The new book by historian Isabel Wilkerson is called *Caste*. In it she compares our American legacy of slavery to that of an old house with structural flaws in it that are ignored at our own peril. Listen to this paragraph:

*We are like homeowners who inherited a house on a piece of land that is beautiful on the outside, but whose soil is unstable, with cracks patched but deeper ruptures waved away for decades, centuries even. Many people may rightly say, ‘I had nothing to do with how this all started. I have nothing to do with the sins of the past. My ancestors never attacked indigenous people, never owned slaves.’ And yes. Not one of us was here when this house was built. Yet here we are, the current occupants of a property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation. We did not erect the uneven pillars and joists, but they are ours to deal with now. And any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands.”<sup>1</sup>*

ELPC consciously chooses to be a church that speaks against oppression, injustice and racism. That means our American and Christian heritages of slavery cannot be ignored, whether it is raised in Paul's letter to the Ephesians or in our history textbooks. In both cases, slavery embodies a fundamental breach in God's order of justice. It may have been a fact of life in ancient Rome and accepted for centuries here on American soil,

but longevity does not make it right. And Paul may have been trying his best to remind both slaves and slaveowners that they serve the same God in heaven, who shows no partiality. But in the end, he was still speaking to one group that was free and one group in chains. Slaves may have had the opportunity to learn certain skills or handle household finances, but they remained someone's property—capable of being exploited, often sexually and physically abused, and permanently seen as second or third-class members of the social order.

The institution of slavery was embedded in the foundation of the American house, first in the slave trade that sustained the early colonies and later in the constitutional and judicial language that shaped our democracy. Twelve of the first 18 American Presidents owned slaves. The paradox of Thomas Jefferson is that he could pen the Declaration of Independence about how “all men are created equal” and hold views that supported abolition, yet over the course of his life, he owned and personally profited from the slavery of 600 people. The 1829 Supreme Court ruling in *State vs. John Mann* said that a slave is “one doomed in his own person and his posterity to toil that another may reap the fruits.” Even worse, it decreed that the institution of slavery could be preserved only if the master wielded “uncontrolled authority over the slave's body.” Given this painful legacy, the African American poet Reginald Dwayne Betts offers a powerful truth in one short sentence: *We all [are] standing on the wrong side of choices.*”

For too long, the language of slavery has been part of our common vocabulary. It is in our scripture and explicitly a part of our American history. And it continues to stain our worldviews whenever the lie is told that to know the world you must know a white, European world. Recognizing that we all stand on the wrong side of choices is the first step toward moving away from racism and sinful brokenness. But this forward movement is not done out of avoidance. It is more than just removing statues or stained glass windows, renaming streets and university halls. It requires speaking up and speaking out. That is why so many in Black Lives Matter civil protests have chanted “Say their names.” Since injustice thrives in silence, breaking the silence is part of how we break the chains. Too many people of color have died because of racial profiling, prejudice and police violence. Their stories cry out “I can't drive” as was true for Philando Castile; “I can't play” as was true for Tamir Rice; “I can't jog”—Ahmaud Arbery; “I can't sleep”—Breonna Taylor; “I can't breathe”—Eric Garner, Derrick Scott, Manuel Ellis, George Floyd.

We say their names and tell these stories because words have power. If there are parts of the bible that we love, it is because words in those passages have power: *Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness can not overcome it.* If there are other parts of the bible that make us uncomfortable, probably it's because it uses words that remind us of things that we're not proud of—times when we've said, *Am I my brother's keeper?* When we've said, *Slaves, obey your earthly masters.* When we've said, *Crucify him. Crucify him.* I have no desire to take away that discomfort. It is part of how we repair the cracks in our old

house. But I do want to offer a word of hope that comes to us from a wise church leader who lived 1600 years ago.

You likely have never heard of St. Gregory of Nazianzus. He was part of the church leadership that was active at the Council of Nicaea when the language around God the Trinity was perfected. Now some people back then insisted that Jesus was mostly divine and only somewhat human—more the Son of God and less the Son of Man to use the old titles. But Gregory insisted that Christ was fully human and fully divine. In fact, he said that all of our human experiences, good and bad, had become part of Christ's experience. That is how he could be the Savior of the world—because Jesus took on all the world and redeemed it through his death and resurrection. This is the phrase from Gregory that I want you to jot down and remember. He said, *Whatever has not been assumed has not been redeemed.* If there is any part of our lives that Christ has not assumed, taken in, then that part would not have been redeemed, healed by Christ's mercy. Such an omission would be unthinkable. Therefore, Gregory rightfully insisted that all has been assumed and in Christ all has been fully redeemed.

In Hebrews 4:15–16, the same idea is expressed using slightly different words. It says, *We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested, tempted, as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*

Now pull all this together. We have long used language that is dependent on sin and injustice, such as slave and slave-owner. We have allowed vocabulary to shape how we see ourselves—whether racist vocabulary that privileges whiteness, gendered language that privileges maleness, heterosexist terminology that encourages homophobic bias, or xenophobic rhetoric that is prejudiced against indigenous peoples and non-Western culture. In addition, we are prone to take derogatory, abusive language to heart, causing us to look in the mirror and see someone less than the image of God. We see a person whose life is negatively labeled by words like addiction, felony, bankruptcy, depression, divorce, cancer, anxiety, or abuse.

This is not meant to cast judgment. I am simply naming the fact that we have all built houses upon flawed foundations, both as nations and as individuals. But in Christ Jesus, we trust One in whom all has been assumed and thus all has been redeemed. You are not defined by abusive words or categories. You are not bound to live in houses erected on foundations beyond repair. We are not people without hope, but rather ones who can approach the throne of grace with boldness and receive mercy and grace to help in all our times of need.

Paul echoed the household codes of old, not to enshrine hierarchies of injustice or condone slavery. He named what was present knowing that something even greater was possible, and by grace we are moved to where we need to be. We too believe that racism is not the final word and that injustice is not the ultimate reality. All the scriptures—all the parts we read and even the parts we skip over—point to this good

news. Our language, our categories, our literal words and our literal lives have been redeemed by One who is greater than all we can imagine. In that is justice and peace; in that is our greatest hope and greatest joy.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, Caste, p. 16.