



*Forward
Toward
Freedom*

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VBS Resource: Three Days, Three Ways

(Inspired by *The 1619 Project* for ages 14-100)

Experience Overview

Summer is here! There is more free time to explore, listen, reflect, and learn. Disciples are learners. Our commitment to forward movement is essential to this part of our identity. As [our preamble](#) states, “In the communion of the Holy Spirit, we are joined together in discipleship...” Together we learn. Together we follow Christ. It was never the intention of Jesus we would walk out our faith in isolation. Domestic terrorism, the pandemic, and growing inequality have brought forward the inevitable fact of our existence *in community*. On any given day, at any given time, the action or inaction of our neighbors can change our lives.

“In 1996, the General Board of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) approved the formation of a church-wide process to discern the nature of racism in North America and to develop ways of helping congregations address racism. Out of this process, an [Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation initiative](#) was put before the church in 1998.” The work continues.

For this reason, the Office of Christian Education seeks to provide an opportunity for you and your church members or study buddies to take a dive into water that is away from the shore. “Forward Toward Freedom” is a learning experience. We have chosen biblical stories to engage in parallel conversation with excerpts from *The 1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones. In 2019, *The New York Times* launched *The 1619 Project*--a collection of historical truths related to slavery and the African American experience of ongoing, legalized racism. Ranging in evil from the most murderous acts to systemic oppression across every institution at work in the country, these are lessons we do not encounter in schools or hardly preach about on Sundays. Your three days include the following:

- **Day One – Freedom of Culture** (two biblical stories, two book spotlights, video, discussion, and an activity)
 - Supplies: Bibles/Bible apps, pages from a book in a foreign language
- **Day Two – Freedom of Body** (two biblical stories, two book spotlights, discussion, video, and an activity)
 - Supplies: Bibles, several flat sheets, scissors, fabric paints, paint brushes, safety pins, old belts
- **Day Three – Freedom of Mind** (two biblical stories, two book spotlights, discussion, song, and closing ritual)

[Juneteenth](#) is approaching and some cannot seem to determine appropriate ways to engage this new federal holiday. We see failed attempts in the production of ice cream by big box grocery stores and watermelon salads on museum menus, yet none of these efforts show any indication of engaging the history—the cause of the holiday. It is the oldest known celebration commemorating the ending of slavery in the United States. Dating back to 1865, it was on June 19, Union soldiers, landed at Galveston, Texas with news that the war had ended and that the enslaved were now free. This was two years after President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Juneteenth was recognized as a federal holiday in 2021. More than two decades earlier, Juneteenth was made a state holiday in Texas. For more than a century prior, since 1866, this day has always been celebrated. Even though Juneteenth items may be showing up in major stores and media for the first time, Juneteenth has been acknowledged and celebrated for over 155 years. “Juneteenth is not a new thing; it is a true thing.”

It is fair to presume some are afraid to talk about the ugliness of kidnapping and enslaving people in the “land of the free;” however, 2 Timothy 1:7 teaches us, “God has not given us a spirit of cowardice, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” Granny may have taught the scripture to you this way, “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of love, power, and a sound mind.” We know that to walk with Jesus, and lead as he did, the truth must be welcome among us. Our God is strong enough to carry us through truth. Our faith in God must be strong enough to make room for it. This resource is to support you in making room.

Freedom of Culture: DAY ONE

Culture is defined in numerous ways. Here are just a few definitions we found from Oxford and Merriam-Webster to share with you for the sake of common understanding:

- Customs
- Arts
- Institutions (spaces of worship, learning, recreation, shopping, banking, gatherings)
- Shared values
- Patterns of knowledge

Without even noticing it, our being in the world is wrapped up in culture or cultures. By way of someone's introduction or by travel, we live in and live out culture. Occasionally, you will hear a preacher or teacher remind folk that Jesus did not come to start a new religion; he came to shift the culture. Well, thank God our Jesus came to shift the culture *toward freedom*. Consider this alongside the definitions of culture above.

Now that we have a mutual understanding of what culture is to a people, imagine what it would be like to have one's culture denied in an instant and denied unto the threat of whips, mutilation, or death. Just pause and consider your life waking up unable to not speak or read in your native language, pray to your God, eat familiar food, wear any of your clothes, live with your family, or even decide when to relieve your body.

Take a moment and share with one another your genuine responses to the denial of culture. (20 minutes)

Take a moment and share with one another what makes up your culture. (15 minutes)

Your responses are the seedbed of empathy and change. Empathy allows for understanding and shared emotion with victims. It is much more powerful and forward-looking than guilt, as guilt centers the offender and does little to correct the offense. In the Day One stories and activities, let us hold onto these opening thoughts as a foundation for learning.

“August 1619, a ship arrives near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the English colony of Virginia, which was founded twelve years earlier. The *White Lion* carries some twenty to thirty captive Africans, who are traded to the Virginia colonists for provisions, making them the first enslaved Africans in the English colonies that will become the United States. Among them are a man named Anthony and a woman named Isabella, who gives birth several years later to a child named William.” Claudia Rankine authored a poem that blooms the cultural consequences of this moment. **Read it together and share reflections.**

The White Lion

Even dawn begins before its beginning
And still, in the tale of the beginning
that forestalls an end, let's agree—
a long way from the Kingdom of Ndongo,
two English ships pirate a third,
the Portuguese *São João Bautista*,
and split up its human cargo. The first
vessel to land at Point Comfort
on the James River enters history,
and thus history enters Virginia
as *twenty and odd Negroes*
are *off-loaded* from the *White Lion*,
the man-of-war carrying movables,
Blacks stripped to Christian names.
The *White Lion*, carrying
A man-made fate, makes landfall,
While Virginia, beginning
its system of land grants, whitens
white indentured servants
by bestowing on them property,
whitens whites who, through
the act of trading victuals
for the stolen renamed unfree
transatlantic labor (their griefs
transient, in reason much inferior),
are inaugurated master as if

any Black would, as if
anyone could, surrender
their value, human,
to tobacco, sugar, and cotton,
the yield of Powhatan lands;
while Virginia writes itself colonial,
filling its first property
ledger with twenty and odd
of the uprooted twelve million,
including Anthony and Isabella,
who, out of the *White Lion's* hold,
step into the whole of history
to give birth to the first child
to take the first steps, provisionally,
toward African American
in Virginia—William, so called,
born free, they say, though
all the while Virginia's wiles
still sail across centuries,
leaving a wake with each
recurring swell, drowning out
what Anthony and Isabella said
to William about love, in love,
in Kimbundu or Kikongo, as if
we could stop knowing
how to know what we know¹

¹ Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project* (New York: New York Times Company, 2021), 2-4.

The *White Lion* poem speaks of Kingdom Ndongo, man-made fates, history's entrance, the whitening of whites, the stolen renamed un-free, and of languages. The *White Lion* speaks to the end of one culture's freedom for the construction of another. We can point to the Book of Esther as a biblical example of one culture being pressed down for the furtherance of another.

In the second chapter of Esther, we meet a young girl named Hadassah. Hadassah's name reflected her Benjaminite culture. She had no mother or father to guard her freedom. Hadassah's cousin, named Mordecai, raised her after her parents died and she was later given the name Esther to hide her ethnicity. To protect her identity and her people, she kept her culture a secret. Participating in King Ahasuerus' exploitation—a parade of virgins, Hadassah won approval, celebration, and a crown from the dominant power, as Esther. We read on to learn, in later chapters of Esther, that safety found in pushing away culture, is fleeting. The season will arise when any marginalized culture comes forward to care for itself when the dominant culture is not yet motivated to care.

Take a moment to share thoughts about the second chapter of Esther. (20 minutes)

Have you ever hidden parts of yourself or your family to get along with others? Discuss.

[Watch now Maya Angelou perform her poem, "The Mask". 0:00-5:29](#)

What did your heart hear from Dr. Maya Angelou? (15 minutes)

What did you see in her face during the poem? (15 minutes)

Rev. Monique Crain Spells serves as the Director of Christian Education and Faith Formation for Disciples Home Missions and the National Convocation of the Christian Church. Prior to this work, her primary ministry was theological education administration at Christian Theological Seminary and Brite Divinity School.



Freedom of Culture Luis Gierbolini

Matthew 7:15-28 & Religion

What does it mean when we hear people sing or say God Bless America? A simple one-verse song, written by Irving Berlin a Russian Jewish Immigrant, became the unofficial national anthem of the United States. Yet this song was not meant to be a patriotic song. It was meant to provide hope as war threatened. Unfortunately, in America, we turn hope into ideology (a system of ideas to build economic and political theory), ideology into law, and law into an idol (representation of a god). God bless America is the perfect example. What does it mean to bless?

Biblical delusion runs deep in the United States of America. These biblical delusions are the groundwork to justify slavery. For example, white enslavers formed an ideology that enslaved Black people were heathens—people without religion or God. Though “African men, women, and children who were captured and transported to the Americas on slave ships brought with them their own religious beliefs and practices...they were often seen as heathens by the colonist, who found justification for enslaving them in the interpretation of biblical scriptures, cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. Theologians of the Reformation period understood Africans as descendants of Canaan and therefore destined to be enslaved.”²

What happens when ideology becomes law? “The colony of Virginia in 1667 passed a law that said baptism does not alter the condition of the person as it pertains to their bondage.”³ If you were Black, enslaved, and “converted” to Christianity, it did not matter that you are free from sin and its bondage. You were not free from your enslaver. Laws such as the one passed in Virginia led the way to establish an invisible religious institution. Black church communities became a place where the Gospel was lived out differently. “The Black preachers and the emerging tradition of Black spirituals contributed to a different understanding of the gospel, one that encouraged and supported a longing for freedom.”⁴ These church communities worked tirelessly to become visible and live a vibrant Christian faith. Freedom is not an invisible institution.

Black churches and communities pressed on to establish the Free African Society. “It provided services in keeping with the gospel of the church, offered various kinds of aid and support to widows, orphans, the sick, injured, destitute, and those running from slavery.” While they progressed, colonizers found new ways to push back each step of the way. The trinity of politicians, law enforcement, and Christians stood together. They idolized Jesus as a redeemer; a redeemer of the South, a world shaped and created for them. Violence once again became their means of pushing back...in [“The Land of Free”](#).

² Hannah-Jones, 340.

³ Ibid., 340.

⁴ Ibid., 341.

We, however, should not be surprised. Jesus warned us of this behavior. In Matthew 7:15-28, at the end of the sermon on the mount, Jesus provided the golden rule "Therefore, you should treat people in the same way you want people to treat you; this is the Law and the Prophets." Jesus reminds those who are listening that the Gospel is ethical living. To live ethically with yourself and your neighbor is hard. He goes on to warn us. "The gate is narrow"; ethical living is practical, not dogmatic or dictatorial. Watch out, they come to you dressed like sheep, but they are vicious wolves inside. Watch what they produce. They will try to create correct beliefs, not proper living. Look at what they build their views on. Who has freedom? Is it devotion to ideology and the law? Or to the ethical teachings of Jesus. Which structure falls? Which one stands?

How are cultures included or excluded by laws? (15 minutes)

What power would you attribute to religious leaders? (15 minutes)

How would you describe a culture of Jesus? (15 minutes)

GROUP ACTIVITY:

Each person should receive a page from a book written in a foreign language. Give everyone about five minutes to review the page before asking each one to read their page aloud. Once everyone has attempted to read their page, try to talk to one another in that same language for about 10 minutes.

Discuss the difficulty and the duration of impossibilities from such a forced reality for 241 years kidnapping. (20 minutes)

Discuss the difficulty and beauty of establishing a culture like Jesus? (20 minutes)



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Freedom of Body: DAY TWO

When we come to understanding around the term “body”, it would be expected for Disciples to think of the Body of Christ. Even from that perspective, a “body” is a carrier. It is a container and vessel for life. Bodies have divine belonging. Their existence does not start with performance or productivity, but in the sacred breath of God. Only in death should our personhood be experienced as separate from our bodies.

The body involves amazingly integrated systems. The mind affects emotions, emotions affect the health of organs, and then organs send messages back to the mind. This all happens without external cause and consumer agendas. This all happens apart from and despite the “isms”—racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and fundamentalism. The body, our bodies, all bodies deserve the utmost respect. If this were not so, why would we bring attention to the body of Christ every Sunday at The Table?

How we come to regard the body starts early. How we appreciate our own bodies can influence how we appreciate the bodies of others. The influential factors around the value of one’s body will come from home, community, media, church, scripture, and self.

What are your first memories about your body or other people’s bodies? (15 minutes)

Do you believe God lives in our bodies? (15 minutes)

When you hear “the body of Christ” during Communion, do you imagine the body of Jesus?

Abuses to humanity have desensitized us to the preciousness of bodies, all bodies. The more we see bodies of people, water, animals, or even trees destroyed, the more we run the risk of not caring enough. Here recently, the massacres in Buffalo, NY and Uvalde, TX have us emotionally wrecked, but to what end? Twelve million Africans were kidnapped, in their bodies, and enslaved across the world. The harm that is possible when we socially and legally disembodify people is indescribable. We must see people, in their bodies, and love the full, unfragmented creation.

Freedom of Body Chesla Nickelson

2 Samuel 11 & Enslaved Women

As a child I was an avid Sunday school student. King David was a popular topic. We learned how he was chosen by God, killed a giant, won wars, and danced until his clothes came off. He was celebrated. On occasion we were taught he made a mistake by committing adultery with Bathsheba. This lesson was to teach us even God's chosen make mistakes sometimes.

The David and Bathsheba origin story is found in 2 Samuel 11. While David was strolling on the palace roof with a view of the city, he spotted the beautiful Bathsheba bathing. He wanted her. David, as the King with absolute power, inquired about her and learned of her father and her husband, Uriah, a soldier in his army. David sent for Bathsheba. David raped Bathsheba.

We have no idea what Bathsheba's thoughts were. We do not know what she wanted. We only know what David wanted. When translated from the original Hebrew text, 2 Samuel 11:4 says, "he took her."⁵ She never had a chance to consent. This was not adultery. Bathsheba did not get a choice. However, over the years I have heard countless sermons, read many bible study lessons, and been in Sunday school classes that accused Bathsheba of being a cunning seductress who lured David. They reframed rape as an act of mutually desired adultery or as a trap Bathsheba set, making Bathsheba a predator and David a victim.

Some of the parallels between the way churches have taught about David's rape of Bathsheba and the way churches and society treat victims of sexual assault, especially black women are sinfully undeniable. Like Bathsheba, enslaved Black women did not get a choice and they often got blamed for abuses to their bodies. *The 1619 Project* reports, "Black women, because they were considered human chattel, had no legal right to bodily autonomy"⁶. Only the white slave owners had rights to and over their bodies.

The last enslaved people were told they were free on June 19, 1865, in Galveston, Texas. Juneteenth is a commemoration of that day and a celebration of freedom. Unfortunately, "with the end of slavery, racial classification no longer determined whether people were enslaved or free, but the ideas that denied Black women's bodily autonomy for nearly 250 years still held great force. The legal system that countenanced sexual violence against Black women and girls had required a moral excuse for its barbarism—especially in a nation that espoused ideals of female chastity and male civility. That justification came in the form of a particular kind of mythology...Whether free or enslaved, Black women were portrayed as always consenting and therefore unrapeable."⁶

⁵ Wilda C. Gafney, *A Women's Lectionary For The Whole Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 2021), 290.

⁶ Hannah-Jones, 54.

When no longer enslaved, they were still far from freedom and bodily autonomy. The mythology developed during slavery, that Black women were hypersexual, lustful, and promiscuous, to justify the violation of Black women's bodies persisted. In the legal system, in churches, in newspapers and in backrooms these insidious demoralizing and dehumanizing characteristics were touted as truth and developed into the long-standing immoral expressions of Black women's sexuality. It was and is another way to dominate and hold power over Black women. As a result, Black women are less likely to be believed and more likely to be blamed when they report rape, sexual assault, or sexual harassment.

There is good news. "Despite the law's denial of their humanity, enslaved women devised numerous ways to claim some control over their lives. They escaped enslavers, endured severe punishments, pretended to be sick and cared for their children."⁷ While we pray and do the work of dismantling systems that take away choice and bodily autonomy, we, too can devise ways to claim control. In 2022 there are Black women all over reclaiming control over their bodies. From the popular musical artist Lizzo choosing to declare her big Black body is good, worthy of love and not needing to be covered to Rev. Lyvonne Proverbs Briggs choosing to advocate for pleasure and teaching about a sensual and embodied faith; Black women are throwing detrimental shame in the trash and choosing unabashed confidence, joy, and love. They are moving *forward*. Having freedom of body, choosing to live into and embody the magnificence of these bodies, created in the image of God, is an aspect of the more abundant life Jesus came and sacrificed for us to have.

What is freedom of body? Freedom of body is the power to choose. That includes choosing to teach about David killing a giant, winning wars and how David sinned by abusing his power and violating Bathsheba's body.

[Watch now Michaela DePrince: Woman in the World.](#)

What privilege in David's society allowed him to take Bathsheba? (20 minutes)
Can you name myths, false stories, or stereotypes that have caused lasting harm?

What does the beauty of Michaela DePrince's dance bring to your mind? (15 minutes)



As an ordained Disciples of Christ Minister with a Master of Arts in Marriage and Family Therapy, Rev. Chesla helps people develop healthy, liberating, and pleasurable relationships. Her expertise lies in the nexus of spirituality, sexuality, self-care, and social justice.

⁷ Hannah-Jones, 59.

Freedom of Body Monique Crain Spells

Genesis 29:15-31 & Economic Systems

On more than one occasion in ministry, when perplexed by the absurdity of a matter, I have been encouraged by an elder to “follow the money.” In doing so, answers always emerge.

“By the time the Civil War began, in 1861, Southern states had established an elaborate governing framework for race relations. Through trial and error, as well as careful planning, white authorities had created oppressive laws and systems of patrolling, surveillance, and punishment, all of which were designed to protect enslavers and the white citizenry from the consequences of their own unmitigated violence and to ensure centuries of prosperity for the planter elite. If the Confederacy had been a separate nation when the Civil War began, it would have ranked among the richest in the world. As the historian Steven Deyle writes in *Carry Me Back: The Domestic Slave Trade in American Life*, the monetary value of the enslaved population in 1860 was “equal to three times the value of the entire livestock population, twelve times the value of the entire U.S. cotton crop, and forty-eight times the total expenditures of the U.S. federal government that year.”⁸

Remembering how we opened Day Two discussing “body” as the extension of God’s breath, it is hard to make sense of how slavery happened and happened for such a long time. However, when we slow down and process the enormous economy it created for thieves, the picture becomes clearer. Stolen land, free labor, and uninhibited profits with little personal cost are a recipe for God-less behavior. There is an African Proverb that says, “The axe forgets what the tree remembers.” The glaciers of inequality alive in the daily experiences of enslaved African descendants are “the tree” with a long memory. Centuries of forced labor have a monetary value. Centuries of forced labor created a bankable economy for one group of people and their descendants. We see an example of such exploitation for profit in Genesis 29:15-31.

To be clear, Jacob and Laban were willfully participating in a system that disregarded women’s bodies, so the root of this story is already disturbing in our “Freedom of Body” context. Still, let’s dig deeper. Jacob has a heart for Laban’s daughter Rachel. Laban agrees to give his daughter to Jacob after he works seven years of “free” labor on Laban’s land. At the end of his labor, Jacob was tricked by Laban and given the older daughter Leah. Jacob was horrified, but insisted he had to have Rachel whom he

⁸ Hannah-Jones, 112.

loved. Laban agreed, but on one condition. Jacob would have to work for seven more years on Laban's land to have Rachel. He complied and was finally given Rachel, but there was strife.

How could there not be strife? A father sold his daughters for field labor. Leah was prostituted for Jacob's labor. No one has the right to take charge of another person's body without consent. No one has the right to profit from someone's body without consent. With enslaved people as with Leah and Rachel, their bodies were monetized. This is contrary to our shared understanding of "body." The breath of God is to be free, not the pawn of capitalism.

How has money been used for evil? (15 minutes)

How would you describe Laban? (15 minutes)

What thoughts come to mind for the exploited (enslaved people, Leah, and Rachel)? What does justice look like for them? (15 minutes)

GROUP ACTIVITY (45 minutes)

Give each participant a flat sheet, fabric paint, four safety pins, and a belt. Encourage them to design something that will adorn their body any way they like. Creativity is welcome. Freedom is expected.

After each one has completed their design, allow them to model and share the motivation for their design. Ask how each participant felt creating their design.

Let us move *forward toward* this sense of freedom!

Freedom of Mind: DAY THREE

The mind is the epicenter of decision and messaging. It produces thoughts and filters thoughts. The mind gives our limbs and our voice instructions. It is powerful! To chain up, ignore, or reject one's own mind is torture. I can recall my Great-Aunt Viola struggling in her speech after suffering a stroke. She would remind me as a child that her mind was strong; it was just trapped in a broken body. My heart rejoices Aunt Viola never stopped putting her mind to work against her physical brokenness. Her love of interaction with us children was worth the struggle.

It is a thing of beauty to imagine something, write it down, plan to make it real in your life, and then live out what you imagined in the world. For African American people, freedom started in coastal West African nations, was held hostage over a few lifetimes, then reimaged, and is being lived out in the world again...little by little. The mind is and has been the driving force in the pursuit of freedom.

[Here now Cynthia Erivo singing "Stand Up" from the blockbuster movie "Harriet."](#)

In the middle of song, she sings,

"Early in the mornin'
Before the sun begins to shine
We're gonna start movin'
Towards that separating line
I'm wadin' through muddy waters
You know I got a made-up mind."

Again, the mind is a force. To make up one's mind is to send force in a particular direction. There would likely be no federal Juneteenth holiday if not for Opal Lee of Texas. Up in her years, she walked from Fort Worth to Washington D.C., petitioning for a Juneteenth holiday to celebrate the full emancipation of enslaved Black people across this country. Her mind was made-up. Her intention was good. As a result of her mind and her many supporters, scores more people in the country know the meaning of Juneteenth and the long path *toward freedom* for African American people.

Relating to freedom, what have you made up your mind to do for yourself and others? Share.
(15 minutes)

Freedom of Mind

Monique Crain Spells

Luke 6:6-11 & The Negro Act of 1740 to the Harlem Renaissance

Luke 6:6-11 says,

“On another Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. [†]The scribes and the Pharisees were watching him to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find grounds to bring an accusation against him. But he knew what they were thinking, and he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come and stand in the middle.” He got up and stood there. Then Jesus said to them, “I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?” After looking around at all of them, he said to him, “Stretch out your hand.” He did so, and his hand was restored. But they were filled with fury and began discussing with one another what they might do to Jesus.”

Jesus had *freedom of mind*. It was the very thing that put a price on his head. He would not surrender his thoughts to the empire. Aware of his enemies' thoughts and God's thoughts about him, Jesus chose to follow his mind and bring about life. Even when faced with death, he retreated to the recesses of his mind and leaned *forward toward freedom*.

“May 10, 1740, The South Carolina Commons House of Assembly passed The Negro Act, making it illegal for enslaved Africans to move freely, assemble in groups, grow food, earn money, or learn to read or write.”⁹ We need to truly take in these restrictions of body and mind and realize what they were intended to do and intended to do for generations. The result of such bondage will take centuries and reparations to heal. Nonetheless, healing and reparations are worthy work. It is necessary work. The height of such a mountain has not kept African Americans from climbing. How do an enslaved people go from The Negro Act of 1740 to the Harlem Renaissance in 1925? They kept their culture, body, and minds committed to freedom. In the forms of poetry, literature, art, dance, and all manner of imaginative expression, they assembled, learned, and earned their way right out of the Negro Act's generational trap.

Like Jesus, African Americans saw their enemies watching to set traps. Like Jesus, African Americans knew healing was necessary, regardless of how inconvenient. Like Jesus, African Americans knew to save life, their own lives. They knew they would have to think for themselves a new way of living and they did!

Where do you see Jesus at work today irritating systems of oppression? (15 minutes)

⁹ Hannah-Jones, 66.

Simon says... "Sit down." Simon says... "Stand Up."

As little kids, we all quickly learned that "Simon" has power. If you don't listen closely to "Simon" then you are going to be out. You could rarely win the game, and the person being "Simon" doesn't want us to win. Simons like to trick us. Simons likes to be in charge. Simons likes power. (We must also admit that sometimes we like being Simon.) Yet... what happens as we grow up and realize that we should not have to follow Simon? There are more "non-Simons" who deserve to be able to stand when they want to stand and sit when they want to sit. There are more people who are "out" than "in." Simons get angry, trickier, and worse. Do we fight harder to become a "Simon"? Or... In this pinnacle moment of our realization that there are more people without power, we have to ask... Why does Simon have the power? As faithful people, don't we believe that God is the "Simon" that we should follow? God, however, is not a Simon that says, "You're Out," but a Simon that seeks for us to all "Be in."

God says... "Love." God says... "Love everyone." God says... "Love me too."

Daniel's friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did not listen to the earthly "Simon." The king of Babylon wanted them to follow him first, but they refused to play his game. They chose to be "out" in the king's game. Their faith chose to follow another, more profound power first... God. But choosing to not play the game in the "way it has always been done" can get many people in trouble. Lots of people are not only "out" but they will be punished for not playing. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were to be killed for not bowing down to the king of Babylon. They were placed in a fiery furnace where witnesses saw that three of them *did not* burn, and a fourth person seemed to be with them. The next day the three of them were able to stand up and walk out. This left people to wonder about who else was with them as they faced death and instead found life.

"In 1960, four Black college freshmen from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, begin a sit-in at a segregated whites-only counter at a Woolworth's in Greensboro. The protest quickly spreads to dozens of other cities around the country. Over the summer, numerous establishments across the South, including the Greensboro Woolworth's, desegregate their dining rooms."¹⁰ Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego they decided not to play the game that constantly made them lose. They could have been killed. Repeat... *they could have been killed.*

¹⁰ Hannah-Jones, 328.

I don't know what empowered them to take that risk to sit, other than a deep knowledge that we live in a world where we should all be free to be "in." God wants us "in." I wonder if they felt a presence that gave them strength in the face of fear. Those four Black men, Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, David Richmond, and Ezell Blair, Jr., found more people who were already "out" and as the numbers grew, many continued to "sit" in places they were not allowed to be, even though "Simons" wanted them to stand somewhere else. Simon can't play "Simon's game" if no one will play with Simon. These young men changed the game. They turned off some of the heat from the fiery furnaces that tried to stop them and others. Like Daniel's friends, they found a way to receive life in the face of death. They trusted in something greater than themselves. They sought a fair life.

How do we or will we give life in the face of so much death? How do we live a life that trust in God's love for creation? Because there are still many who play "Simon says." As we find comfort in the life-giving responses of those in our biblical and historical stories, we must ask ourselves – what game are we playing? Are the rules fair? Are they faithful? Are they giving life to God's creation? Yet, it is okay to fear the fiery furnaces. It is hard to be "out." But once you realize there are friends, people who will sit with you, and a God that will be with you... You get a glimpse of a world where there are no "games." All you have to remember is, God says... "Love." God says... "Love everyone." God says... "Love me too."

How do you determine which voices you will follow? (15 minutes)

How do you believe one prepares their mind to take a stand? (15 minutes)

What does God call us to stand for in this world? (15 minutes)



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Forward Toward Freedom: **CLOSING RITUAL**

Leader: We find ourselves in June. It is a wonderful time to lift up freedom!

People: It was June, in Galveston, TX, where they celebrated the 1865 emancipation of all enslaved people in the United States. Free people gathered and called it Juneteenth.

Leader: We remember the beginning of this long story, the middle, & what has yet to end?

People: We remember the *White Lion*. We remember the emergence of the Black church in the *Free African Society*. We remember the enslaved woman's abused body. We remember the economy built by slaves. We remember The Negro Act and the Harlem Renaissance. We remember the North Carolina A&T freshmen at a Woolworth's counter.

Leader: We remember Hadassah. We remember Bathsheba. We remember Leah and Rachel. We remember Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. We remember Jesus.

People: In our remembering, let us remember to move forward... Forward toward Freedom-- Freedom of Culture, Freedom of Body, and Freedom of Mind.

Leader: Let us each call the name of a freedom fighter in our lives.

(Allow time for names)

Leader: Stand to your feet, put one hand on your heart and stretch one hand toward God's great sky. Now, as loud as you can, call your own name.
(Allow the self-proclamations to ring out in the space)

People: With the help of God, we will go forward toward freedom! Amen.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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