

It's Juneteenth time: A Juneteenth Sermon June 19, 2022
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Juneteenth is the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States.

From its Galveston, Texas origin in 1865, the observance of June 19th as the African American Emancipation Day has spread across the United States and beyond.

Today Juneteenth commemorates African American freedom and emphasizes education and achievement. It is a day, a week, and in some areas, a month marked with celebrations, guest speakers, picnics and family gatherings. It is a time for reflection and rejoicing. It is a time for assessment, self-improvement and for planning the future. Its growing recognition signifies a level of maturity and dignity in America long overdue. In cities across the country, people of all races, nationalities and religions are beginning to truthfully acknowledge a period in our history that shaped and continues to influence our society today.

Sensitized to the conditions and experiences of others, our context and history-- only then can we make significant and lasting improvements in our society.

That's Juneteenth time, a time of truth telling, reflection and action.

—Now-- Growing up I simply had no idea that there was a day dedicated to celebrating the day when slaves were truly freed—not by official proclamation as customarily taught, but by an enforced reality, which took the form of one Union General and 2000 Federal troops arriving in Galveston, Texas, to officially free slaves who were still held in bondage in the last Southern state in open rebellion. Despite the importance of Juneteenth as a state holiday in Texas and observed officially in another 44 states, plus D.C., for many—it is a new learning that Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 had not done everything which the majority historical narrative had commonly ascribed to it. It is shocking to learn that a full two years after Lincoln's Proclamation, those Texas slaves had yet to be supported by the Republic that declared they were truly free.

That was not the historical narrative that was taught to me as a child—even as I attended a primarily African American school for a good part of me elementary

school. As with so many things in adulthood (which is on-going, I might add), my education of the historical narrative was incomplete. I know I am not alone.

If we are to be honest, many of us likely had incomplete narratives, whatever our race, our gender, our class, or our religion. Part of mature faith is learning when and how the spiritual, religious, and social narrative that we learned as children or even as adults has been incomplete.

Our bible is also rich in slave narrative. At various times in history, that slave narrative has been used to justify chattel slavery and unhealthy power-dynamics between various tribes, races, and peoples. However, our bible is also rich in narratives of liberation (as we have heard today) which is one reason why many slave owners forbid slaves going to church or the resident slave preacher preaching anything other than obedience to the master of the plantation lest the slaves rebel.

Within its complex narratives, the Bible explores the dynamics of relationship and freedom, containing powerful stories of God's leaders and liberators— Moses, Jesus, and yes, Mary were liberators to those enslaved by powers and principalities that would bind and oppress the human spirit and human heart.

Our Hebrew and Christian forebears thought it important to teach their children about God's presence, power, and action even in the midst of enslavement while helping those enslaved to tap into God's Spirit to encourage their own disheartened spirits and to empower them. Enslavement is a hard word these days to discuss in mixed groups. For many people, enslavement is something to leave behind, an idea that belongs only to the sad dust of the past. For these, the slavery issue was settled long ago, at least in certain overt forms. Yet, depending on who you talk to, slavery is alive and well in the human heart, if not in its physical form, such as chattel slavery and the like, then in so many other insidious forms.

BUT It's Juneteenth time.

Scripture teaches us that while we may individually be in bondage to many things, we may also powerfully and simultaneously be held captive collectively as well. In Jesus' time, the Roman Empire held the poor captive thru its policies and propaganda that favored Rome's interests, oppressed the Jewish people, and made worship of the Emperor an obligatory cult religion. Similarly, certain ideas about

the worth of the sinner, the leprous, the outcast, and the physically blind kept people in bondage and isolated from both healing and community.

Today, violence grips this nation, including and maybe especially racialized violence—and in many nations around the world. While we could discuss the particularity of its forms, violence seems to be amongst our most vicious bondage. We think of the victims of violence in churches and synagogues, children in a Uvalde school, a New York grocery store. Whether we are considering gun violence, police brutality, or domestic violence, violence between two nations, or two peoples, or violence that has escalated to genocide, how we deal with our own violent tendencies has spiritual ramifications.

In fact, this year marks the 100th anniversary of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre--- which took place From May 31 to June 1, 1921, one of the single worst acts of racial violence in American history took place as mobs of white residents of Tulsa, Oklahoma, attacked the black people and black-owned businesses of the city's Greenwood District. a horrific spree of murder, arson and looting inflicted by white residents upon the prosperous African American community of Greenwood, followed by a shameless cover-up.”-- largely ignored in American history classes - - only to become a forgotten crucial part of history that's only being recently nationally remembered..

Friends, it's Juneteenth time. A time of remembrance and honoring,

This year, faith groups across the country participated in a June 17 bible study to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the massacre at Mother Emanuel AME Church.

The study focused on the passage that parishioners were studying the night a gunman entered their church and killed nine people: Mark 4:1-20, The Parable of the Sower/Soils.

In the very scripture Jesus interprets the meaning of the parable, saying to them, “Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable?¹⁴ The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵ Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. ¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy.¹⁷ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly

fall away. ¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²⁰ Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

“In examining the theme ‘What Kind of Soil Are We’, we can pray and hope that our communities will conduct a self-examination of what is in our heart. That we must never allow the seed of hatred and deceit to pull our communities apart! We must continue to be intentional in reminding our communities about the power of the undeniable fact that love is stronger than hate, and that we are resuscitated by the liberative journey of God’s justice and love.

AND Friends, it’s Juneteenth time.

What does it mean when our need to be right does violence to community or to relationship or to our own collective and personal ability to admit harms and wrongs? In many cases, we will find allegiance to the gospel puts our other loyalties in perspective, if not all at once, then gradually, as we come to love the justice God loves and the people God loves.

That’s Juneteenth time.

It is obvious that our society is struggling towards a future that ensures greater equality and visibility for those who have not experienced the kind of reconciliation and redress that our holy Bible envisions and promises.

Racism and violence were in the soil here where we live before America became America.

Violence has long been our country’s national savior.

We can’t extricate ourselves from that, and the brutality of its structural manifestations in our country.

Humanity has wandered from the path of love and wholeness ... But we do know, don’t we, that God wills our collective freedom as a people together, and as a people who need each other to survive and to thrive.

It is high time, it is Juneteenth time, to come together to change the false and competing narratives that divide us. Juneteenth is an opportunity for us to remember and reflect on our national wounds.

And If we think about the jubilee referenced in today's Gospel--

It's about this ...Every 50th year was to be set aside as a time for liberation and restoration when all Israelites would return to their ancestral land (Leviticus 25:10). Those who became poor were not to be taken advantage of nor taken as slaves but rather treated as hired hands and released at the year of Jubilee. Isaiah 61 was interpreted in first century Judaism as a reference to the Jubilee and the restoration it envisioned.

AND then in Luke 4: 20-21: When JESUS finishes reading, Jesus sat down [the usual posture for a teacher²], and the congregation fixed their eyes on him to hear his teaching. Jesus begins explaining the Scripture by telling them that today when they heard the Scripture read it was fulfilled in their presence. Jesus himself will be the location for the fulfillment of this prophesy.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is the one who has been chosen (anointed) to preach and proclaim the good news of God.

In the scripture passages ahead, Jesus will travel from town to town and wherever he goes he will teach and heal living out the good news so that people can see the salvation that God offers and they are called to proclaim it and live it.

We can also imagine Jesus' hometown congregation, filled with all the characters of the village — rich and poor; seeing and blind; oppressed and oppressor — and wonder what this liberation looked like for them. Did they anticipate the good news would come first to the poor, the prisoner, and the oppressed? Or did they think it would come first for those with inside connections, the rich, and the religious? Jesus offers them good news. Will they hear it and receive it as good news to be shared with all, especially the vulnerable? Or will they hear it and hope that it is a message for them alone? Are they hoping that as Jesus' hometown they will receive special favor? Exclusive favor? Or does their hope extend to the whole world?

So, How do we imagine and embody that declaration of liberation for ourselves, as we reflect on our history this Juneteenth, reflect on the intention of jubilee and liberation and are intent on sowing a just and God driven path?

in the secular world—there are real and tangible pathways for us. Just last year in 2021--At the UN Human Rights Council, more than 140 nations joined the United States in a statement outlining the continuing scourge of racism and racial discrimination, xenophobia, and other forms of intolerance. This historic cross-regional statement was a call to action for all nations to:

- acknowledge and address the legacy and persistence of systemic racism
- redress inequities in policies that serve as barriers to opportunity
- eliminate barriers to political participation

We can also think about our Church's (ECUSA) work on discussing the role of reparations and own history within the economy of slavery and its legacy.

On the other hand, we struggle in seeing the distressing inability for our country's leaders to agree on legislation to protect our communities, children from gun violence and massacres.

Sisters and brothers, we might feel despairing on how to address the violence and the racism in our community at large. BUT we do know a better way, a Jesus way, to ask the questions, and to take the actions that will get us closer to the vision of God's people liberated.

As you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Even as I stand here, I don't have a simple answer...but I know we need to awaken to the true narrative in Christ (which is love and liberation), know the truth of our history in our minds and bodies—and heal together, act together...AND

I pray it might be Juneteenth time.

AMEN