

“Juneteenth”

by Tim Hall

Sunday, June 16, 2024 – 4th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

(RCL: Ezekiel 17:22-24; Psalm 92:1-4,11-14; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34)

Opening prayer: “May the words...”

On “Freedom’s Eve,” or the eve of January 1, 1863, the first Watch Night services took place. On that night, enslaved and free African Americans gathered in churches and private homes all across the country awaiting news that the Emancipation Proclamation had taken effect. At the stroke of midnight, prayers were answered as all enslaved people in Confederate States were declared legally free. Union soldiers, many of whom were black, marched onto plantations and across cities in the south reading small copies of the Emancipation Proclamation spreading the news of freedom in Confederate States. Only through the Thirteenth Amendment did emancipation end slavery throughout the United States.

But not everyone in Confederate territory would immediately be free. Even though the Emancipation Proclamation was made effective in 1863, it could not be implemented in places still under Confederate control. As a result, in the westernmost Confederate state of Texas, enslaved people would not be free until much later. Freedom finally came on June 19, 1865, when some 2,000 Union troops, led by Major General Gordon Granger, arrived in Galveston Bay, Texas. The army announced that the more than 250,000 enslaved black people in the state, were free by executive decree. This day came to be known as “Juneteenth,” by the newly freed people in Texas.

The post-emancipation period known as Reconstruction (1865-1877) marked an era of great hope, uncertainty, and struggle for the nation as a whole. Formerly enslaved people immediately sought to reunify families, establish schools, run for political office, push radical legislation and even sue slaveholders for compensation. Given the 200+ years of enslavement, such changes were nothing short of amazing. Not even a generation out of slavery, African Americans were inspired and empowered to transform their lives and their country.

Juneteenth marks our country’s second independence day. The historical legacy of Juneteenth shows the value of never giving up hope in uncertain times. Although it has long celebrated in the African American community, this monumental event remains largely unknown to most Americans.

~ from The National Museum of African American History and Culture website

I'm curious about when you came to know of Juneteenth. Please raise your hand if you've known about Juneteenth for more than five years. How about in the last one to five years? Or just recently, perhaps even today or the last couple of weeks? Do you know that it is now a national holiday?

I'm in that group that hadn't heard of it until about 5 years ago or so. Sure, I knew about the Emancipation Proclamation, issued at the height of The Civil War. And I knew of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to our constitution, otherwise known as The Reconstruction Amendments, which abolished slavery, gave citizenship to all people born in the US, and gave Black Americans (only men, I might add) the right to vote.

We all know that slavery is an age old practice, ingrained not only in America since the 1600's, but in humanity itself. Jesus often spoke about slaves and in the Hebrew books of the Law, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, there are many passages dealing with how to treat slaves. However much we deplore the thought and continued practice of slavery today, there's no getting around the fact that it became a big business in our country.

Writing in his 2012 book, "Richmond's Unhealed History", the Rev. Benjamin Campbell, former rector of St. Paul's Episcopal Church on capitol hill in Richmond in the 1970's tells of the planting of a cross in the "New World" by Captains John Smith and Christopher Newport. Less than a month after making landfall at Jamestown, they have sailed upstream to the falls of the James River. Watched by hundreds of citizens of Tsenacomoco, they lay claim to the land in the name of the king of England to the cheers of their accompanying soldiers.

Rev. Campbell goes on to say, "They not only planted the seed of a great nation with unprecedented opportunity for all human beings; they also planted seeds of economic exploitation, racial discrimination, a hierarchical class system, and a heretical version of Christianity."

Writing in the 2021 anthology "Four Hundred Souls", Kai Wright tells of the Virginia Slave Codes enacted in the early 1700's. By that time slavery was well established. But those in power were becoming concerned that formerly enslaved people were becoming a problem. Hence, laws were enacted to ensure their enslavement for generations.

After quoting from the codes, Mr. Wright goes on to say that “the slave codes of 1705 are among American history’s most striking evidence that our nation’s greatest sins were achieved with clear forethought and determined maintenance. But they would not be the final word on anti-Black violence.”

We know all that followed. The struggles that continue, even today. As Mr. Wright says, “The past is close.” These same aberrations will continue, if we allow it. But if we heed the apostle Paul’s words, “The love of Christ urges us on, so that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died for all.” FOR ALL.

It wasn’t until I was working at the Carver Senior Center in Purcellville, after retirement, that I learned of Juneteenth. You see, the building that houses that senior center had been the segregated black high school in Purcellville. It is located in the heart of what was then the African American section of town. Named after George Washington Carver, it provided a “Separate but Equal” education until the Civil Rights Act and bussing brought its demise in the late 1960’s.

Reborn years later, many of its senior members had actually been students there back in the day. It was from them that I originally learned of Juneteenth, I actually got to help them in the planning of what was already an ongoing annual event there, also known as Emancipation Day. And what fun it was to share in their joy. Quoting Psalm 133: “How good and pleasant it is when brethren live together in unity!”

Yesterday, Judy and I attended the Berryville Juneteenth Celebration at the Clarke County Fairgrounds. It was a festive gathering, with food trucks, vendors, a nicely done historical display, and music by the “Souled Out Band”. That’s souled spelled s-o-u-l-e-d. As we came around from behind the grandstand to where we could hear the music, the band was playing “Celebration” by Kool and the Gang. You know that one... “Celebrate good times, come on!” And from that they segued into “We are Family” by Sister Sledge. You couldn’t help but to clap hands and move. I thought, how appropriate this music is, not only for Juneteenth but for our lectionary readings today as well.

God gave us a world of beauty, where all could flourish. From our Old Testament reading of Ezekiel, “Thus says the Lord God: I will plant a tender sprig on the mountain height, that it may produce boughs and bear fruit and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live and nest and all shall know that I am Lord.” And our Psalm sings that the righteous, planted in the house of the Lord, shall flourish, be green and succulent, and continue to bear fruit, even in old age.

We have come together this morning to celebrate, not only this day, but the centuries long contributions African Americans have made to our country, even in the face of so much discrimination and bigotry. They have woven countless beautiful threads throughout our American tapestry. They adopted Christianity, the religion of their oppressors, and have added so much to that faith tradition, holding close its promises to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to set the captive free. And most of all, through all their persecution, to Jesus' promise of salvation.

They and we nest together in that greatest of shrubs Jesus taught in his parable. Just as the product of that mustard seed is filled with birds of many different varieties, so our world is filled with people of many different shapes and sizes and colors. Our black brothers and sisters, even after being brought in bondage from their homelands on the middle passage, after being kept in generational slavery for untold years, after suffering from systemic racism, show us the power of perseverance, of faith and hope in God in Christ.

We are all one in the Spirit and one in the Lord. Let us all be in Christ, for in him "there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" May it ever be so.