

Juneteenth

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Ancient Witness: Acts 11:7-9, 11-12

Today I want to talk about Juneteenth, the celebration of the end of slavery in the United States. In 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. But it wasn't until June 19, 1865, two months after the end of the Civil War, that Texas became the last state in the union to finally set its slaves free. Last June, the U.S. Congress and President Biden made Juneteenth a federal holiday.

Now someone may ask, why would a white pastor and an overwhelmingly white congregation in eastern Washington observe Juneteenth? Some would say, how could I have the audacity?

Well, first, anybody who loves justice should celebrate Juneteenth. We mark our gratitude that the heinous institution of slavery—the cruel subjugation of human beings—finally came to an end in this nation.

Second, as followers of Jesus, it would follow that we would give thanks for the emancipation of a people that were held in bondage. Paul wrote that Jesus broke down the dividing walls of hostility that divide humanity, and that in Jesus there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female, for all are one. So Jesus lived and died for a vision of a world where one group or nation or race would dominate others. But his vision was one of equality and unity and oneness of all people.

Jesus, the central figure in our spiritual tradition, sought to transform not just hearts, but he sought to transform systems and laws that upheld privilege. He challenged and broke purity laws of his day that divided races—Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans—that separated the poor, sick, lame and lepers from those in privilege—that divided women to subservience.

One of the major themes in the Bible was the liberation of the people of Israel from the bondage of slavery. And Jesus, himself, was seen as an instrument of God's liberating, emancipating love.

In our passage today from Acts, the apostle Luke wrote about Peter's vision of a voice telling Peter, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." And then it struck Peter that the vision wasn't just about food and dietary laws, but it was about people. Three foreigners appeared at his house, and Peter said, "The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us." Jesus vision had taken hold of Peter, and the Spirit told him to stop making these false distinctions between them and us.

Jesus was on the side of all of those who were considered inferior and were singled out, and he challenged any purity system that would put them "in their place." He challenged not just

personal attitudes, but he challenged the entire caste system of privilege and dominance, a system of “keeping things in their place.” And this is why, it seems to me, he was such a threat and why he had to be killed by the religious and political establishment.

Marcus Borg, a New Testament scholar, once wrote,

Jesus wasn't talking about how to be good and how to behave within the framework of a domination system. He was a critic of the domination system itself.

This is why many of the early abolitionists were followers of Jesus and his alternative social vision. And so we observe and honor Juneteenth as an expression of our biblical faith.

But we also must acknowledge that one of the driving forces behind slavery was the Christian church. There was a form of Christianity that justified racial superiority and the owning of human beings with a distorted reading of the sacred texts. Like fundamentalism of other generations, they used the Bible to serve their greed and self interest instead of allow the Bible to transform their hearts to serve God. This was the slaveholder's religion. And it is a stain on the history of the American church.

There's a church today, not too far from here in Idaho, whose pastor makes many of the same arguments upholding slavery that were heard 200 years ago.

This leads me to the third reason why a white pastor, in an overwhelmingly white congregation, in a predominately white community *needs* Juneteenth. We *need* to observe it. Why? Because we need to acknowledge this history and the way that our ancestors benefited from this history, and we need to repent. Juneteenth for white Americans and white Christians is a *day of repentance*.

Our ancestors allowed the walls of hostility to stand. They allowed separation to persist. They allowed a false God of white superiority to infect their lives. They allowed this distinction to exist between them and us. They allowed a system that divided the children of God from each other.

The word, “repentance,” comes from the Greek word, *metanoia*, which means to change one's mind, change one's perspective, change one's way of living, change the direction we are heading. And when we talk about emancipation, we are called to change the road we are on. The road I'm talking about is the road of racism. We need to be committed to being on a different road.

This road justified and rationalized owning and abusing human beings as property, as less than human. Yes, slavery ended in this nation, and we give thanks for that. However, we need to get off the road that lead to slavery. Because that road continued after slavery during the Jim Crow era.

The original Jim Crow was a name of a minstrel show character, and it represented a time of lynching and terror and the system of laws in the South that were implemented to demean and to

keep black men, women and children “in their place” after the abolition of slavery. These were laws that prohibited intermingling of whites and black, laws against intermarriage, voting and discrimination in virtually every sphere of life.

In many ways, Jim Crow was dismantled by the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) and Supreme Court decisions that overcame “separate and unequal” structures of schools.

This road didn’t stop when Jim Crow ended, either. In her book, *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander brilliantly described how a new system emerged that keeps black men, women and children “in their place,” a new system of social control. She argues, very persuasively, that “mass incarceration is, metaphorically, the New Jim Crow and that all those who care about social justice should fully commit themselves to dismantling this new racial caste system.”

The criminal justice system became a tool for a system of oppression that would keep black people in their place. The number of men incarcerated went from 300,000 in 1980 to 2.3 million 30 years later, decimating black families and social structure. This was fueled primarily by the “war on drugs” declared by Ronald Reagan in 1982, followed by mandatory minimum sentences and huge expenditures for enforcement.

And today, the United States now has the highest incarceration rate in the entire world, surpassing highly repressive regimes such as Russia, China and Iran. The U.S. imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than even South Africa did at the height of Apartheid.

I would add that police brutality and killing is part of this New Jim Crow, resulting not just in arrests, but in the deaths and injury of black people in disproportionate numbers.

And so when I say that Juneteenth is a day of repentance for white American, it is not just repenting from slavery and benefiting from that legacy. It is repenting—changing direction, making a course correction—from the road that led to slavery and to Jim Crow and to the New Jim Crow today. Today is a day of repentance, a conscious turning away from racism. It was the great preacher, William Sloane Coffin who once said years ago that we need affirmative action because there have been years and years of negative action.

May this day be one where we reflect and acknowledge the harm that has been done, stand in solidarity with our black and brown sisters and brothers, and learn how to repair and restore the harm of slavery and racism.

Racism, it seems to me, is anything that upholds privilege. It doesn’t need to be deliberate. It’s not just bad, hateful people who participate and perpetuate racism. At its core, racism is systemic. It’s all of us good people who participate in a system that upholds and protects white privilege. It’s not just about overt, hateful motives, but it’s mostly about unconscious participation of a purity system.

And so may we use this day to acknowledge a system based upon racial superiority, to challenge it, to separate ourselves from it, and to transform it.