

The Spirit of Truth



Karl Brodthagen, "Emancipation Statue" 1985.

The Rev. John Sampson, Pastor
Glen Ridge Congregational Church
Sunday, June 15, 2025
John 16:12 – 15

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

As I mentioned, in this upcoming week, we celebrate the newest of all of our federal holidays, which is Juneteenth. And Juneteenth remembers that moment when the final cohort of enslaved people were ultimately freed.

If you remember your history, or if you don't, I'm going to tell it again. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed all of the enslaved people of this nation. Slavery had been with us for centuries. And it isn't just a system in which people are not paid for their work. It is a devastating system of cruelty and inhumanity that impacted hundreds of thousands, millions of people in our own nation. And finally, at the beginning of 1963, President Lincoln put an end to what the theologian James Cone called America's original sin.

But as it is in our world, just because he signed a proclamation, an executive order, didn't mean that slavery immediately and everywhere came to an end. It was a process that took

much time. Finally, in June of 1865, two and a half years after the proclamation was signed, the final set of slaves were freed in Galveston, Texas. June 19th, Juneteenth is the day we celebrate the final fulfillment of the promise and the dream not just of Lincoln, but of those who founded our nation that all men and women would be free and equal in this country.

Abraham Lincoln didn't think that this was just an act of the secular state. It wasn't just simply a civilian proclamation. At the end of the proclamation, he says, "Yes, this is the fulfillment of the Constitution and the dream of this nation. It is also the fulfillment of the power of almighty God. Lincoln saw in the emancipation of the slaves the working hand and will of God in our nation because he remembered the stories of his faith, our faith, which tell of another people held in slavery for almost exactly the same amount of time as those African slaves of our own country. He remembered the story of the Israelites who had been bound in Egypt for centuries and finally they achieved their freedom not simply because they had might or will but because God's spirit was intimately involved in their liberation.

For Abraham Lincoln, God's spirit was intimately involved in the liberation of those enslaved in our nation. Our reading today says that when the spirit of truth shows up, all truth will be revealed. We may have an image of God that God is forever the same. The unmoved mover of Aristotle. But in our experience of God, things change. The light becomes brighter. New paths forward that were once unthinkable reveal themselves to us. And that is what has happened in our nation with slavery.

I have something to admit. This is a season in which I introduce myself to you and it has been a string of confessions. So here is my daily confession to you. I had no idea what Juneteenth was until I was into my 40s. I had never heard of it. There were no special car sales shown on the TV. Come in for your Juneteenth special, buy one get one free. There was no holiday from school. None of those people in my family who would brag about how they went to Harvard ever told me about it. None of the fancy schools I went to ever shared it with me. It was only when I was in seminary in my 40s that one of my classmates was talking about Juneteenth as if everyone knew about it.

I had to Google it.

When I read why we celebrate Juneteenth, I couldn't believe I had never heard of it and that we weren't celebrating this as a people with fireworks and parades, days off and special car dealership sales. Now, a lot has changed since then. Since then, Juneteenth has become a federal holiday. It is our newest federal holiday that embraces this amazing moment in our secular culture.

But it is also a moment we should celebrate as people of faith. We come out of this line, this line of faith and tradition that puts the truth of enslavement and liberation of God working through history right front and center as one of the seminal stories of our tradition. We may not have been enslaved. We may not know what it's like to be liberated. But we are

a people of faith who carries this message deeply in our spiritual bones. As people of faith, we should be celebrating God's good work in liberation reflected in our own national history.

So, I was trying to find an image for the bulletin today and I Googled Juneteenth. All of the images that came up were of African-American people celebrating. There was not one image of a Euroamerican person celebrating Juneteenth. So sure, if I was part of a people who had achieved liberation from literal slavery, I would celebrate. I'd bake my red velvet cake. I'd have a parade. I'd shoot off fireworks. But what does it say that someone with my skin color was never portrayed in a celebration of Juneteenth?

I think what the liberation from slavery both in our national history and in our faith history invites all of us to do is to look within to the places within ourselves that may still need liberation, may still need to be set free from the places in which unbeknownst to ourselves, unadmitted to ourselves, there is still work to be done. In the scriptures, sin is often associated to a single person, but most more often it is associated to a group of people. When the prophets come to share the word of God, they don't ever go to one person. They go to a nation. They go to a people. and they ask those people to live more deeply into God's invitation for equality, for justice, to be more loving. I think we as a people in this upcoming Juneteenth are asked to commit, recommit more deeply as a people to the good work of liberation, no matter what our skin color, no matter who is enslaved, no matter if we believe we have always been free.

So, on this Juneteenth, go to the parades, eat red velvet cake, shoot off fireworks, but also invite that spirit of truth into your hearts and your souls, to the good work of love and liberation within you. We as a community can pray that we as a church invite that same spirit into our pews, into our worship, into the ways in which we live our lives. Not just this week when there's a federal holiday to remind us, but on every day in our lives.

Amen.