

The Work is Not Done

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Let us pray. O God, open our ears so that we can hear. Open our eyes so that we can see. Open our hearts so that we can feel. Open our minds so that we can perceive. Open our hands so that we can do. Open our lips so that we can speak. O God, open our lives so that we might live the life you call us into. Amen.

Today as you will notice on the front of the bulletin is Juneteenth. It is a celebration of the day when slaves were truly freed —not by official proclamation as is 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. For those slaves, freedom came more than two years after President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. In other words, Juneteenth marks a delayed emancipation. Because they were never communicated, the words President Lincoln wrote on a piece of paper were meaningless to those people still being enslaved in Texas. But words on a piece of paper even if they are communicated just set out an intention. That is important, but if the intention is not backed by action, the words and the intention become meaningless. I noticed in the bulletin that the Anti-Racism task force is conducting a vision-based planning event next Sunday. They have titled the event “Justice, Love, and Inclusion for All” – Vision into Action. First Church has both a new mission and vision statement but like the Emancipation Proclamation, if the words are not

backed by action, they are just words on a piece of paper. Kudos to you for seeking to put words into action.

This past Saturday, I attended a Juneteenth celebration at Living History Farms. I was nearly moved to tears as I heard African American Iowa District Court Judge, Odell McGhee read the Emancipation Proclamation. In no way can I imagine how those words were heard by those who had been enslaved. They say that confession is good for the soul, so I am going to confess that I had learned about the Proclamation but had never read it for myself. I believed that the historical narrative I had been taught was the only narrative there was. As with so many things I'm discovering in my adulthood, my education narrative was incomplete, so I'm not surprised that until several years ago, I had no idea about Juneteenth. The fact that I was not exposed to a celebration that was meaningful to many African Americans was just another part of the majority narrative that I was exposed to—one that gave priority and preference to the history of Whites, and not of persons of color or Native Americans or any other perceived minority.

As the Emancipation Proclamation stated, "The Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom." For a short time after the war the Federal Government enforced laws to protect African Americans in the South and they acquired a small amount of power.

But soon after, compromises, money interests and an engrained culture of entitlement led to disempowerment through direct violence, segregation, and Jim Crow Laws. In addition, many former slaves migrated North where they were met with job and housing discrimination. Many had been separated from their families during slavery, and so there was no family structure to support them. Recently there was an article in the Atlantic Magazine entitled the “Case for Reparations” which spoke specifically about the abuses the African American Community were confronted with in Chicago, with redlining preventing them from obtaining home loans. They were forced to borrow at exorbitant rates from less than scrupulous lenders and in a recent bank scandal, banks were specifically targeting African American churches to sell subprime mortgages to their members with high fees and terms that were bound to force foreclosure in the future. We know African Americans and people of color are targeted by police for search and arrest in far greater proportions than Whites. What does it mean to be free if the system works against you have no opportunities to better your lot in life?

Freedom is an important value in our country and in our faith. In our gospel lesson today, Jesus sets free a man who had been possessed by demons. He sets free a man who once had to be kept under guard and was bound and shackled and gave him a new life of freedom and dignity. This gospel story is just one of many powerful stories of God’s liberators who sought to free those enslaved by power and principalities that would bind and oppress the human spirit and human heart.

As followers of Jesus, we too are called to free those who are oppressed. Today we don't much like to talk about enslavement. We think that it is something that belongs only to the sad dust of history. For many people, the slavery issue was settled long ago, at least in overt forms. And yet for many, slavery is alive and well in the human heart, if not in its physical form, then in more subtle and insidious forms.

Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg address said *"It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain."*

Did they die in vain? Have we finished the work for which they gave the last full measure of devotion? I think not. Now I am not saying this to make you feel guilty, for the truth is feeling guilty leads to shame, and shame leads to not talking about the issues that hurt us. But I tell you this to remind you of our responsibility as citizens of this country, to remind you of the moral duty our faith asks of us. It must be more than just about us. It must be for everyone. It doesn't matter that slavery happened before we were born or if we were not personally a part of it. Whites still must live with the ramifications of those acts, and we still benefit from those acts. As Christians, we are called to help raise all people to freedom.

Unlike the Declaration of Independence's claim of the pursuit of happiness, Ralph Waldo Emerson said "The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well." The questions we must ask ourselves are not what we are going to write, what we are going to say at parties or potlucks in polite company, but rather what we are going to do, what can we do to right the wrongs of the past? What type of healing and reconciliation can we put forward to bind up the wounds?

Our country is wounded. We have let racial hatred fester. We need to deal directly with the problem, or it will eat us alive. There is a path to reconciliation. It is not always clear and it's hard, it takes both humility and courage.

When we are in pain, it is hard to see something from another's perspective. And although we hope to find a mutual solution, it is not always about finding a solution but rather about building relationships. It's about making new commitments and covenants and about putting closure to the past so we can start a new beginning. It is about living out our values to build the beloved community, a community that includes everyone working together to bring home the captured, to find the lost, to feed the hungry, to house the homeless, to heal old wounds.

Let us work together to do what we can do and in so doing encourage others as well. In 2009 the United States Senate and House offered a Resolution of Apology for Slavery. It said in part, "*While no apology for past wrongs could ever right*

them, a spirit of true repentance on behalf of a government can help to speed racial reconciliation and healing; it is hoped that by acknowledging a grievous past we will better avoid future human tragedies.”

Again, nice words on paper but at the end of the statement it says (in big letters) *"DISCLAIMER- Nothing in this resolution--(A) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or (B) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States."* That sounds just a little defensive to me. Even Abraham Lincoln realized the need to work for healing and reconciliation. As the Civil War was waning, Lincoln ended his second inaugural address with these words: *"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to **finish the work we are in**, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."*

A just and lasting peace....one day may it be so. But there is still unfinished work. In our lives, in our congregation and in the larger world. We often don't like to talk about things that make us uncomfortable and that includes race and racial inequality. But we will never find wholeness if we do not do the work. Both the internal and external work. The internal work to understand ourselves and what drives us, drives us to act the way we do or to ignore the things we ignore. And the external work to bring justice and healing to a fractured world.

Walt Whitman said in his poem Song to Myself *“I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own, and I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own, and that all the men ever born are also my brothers and the women my sisters, and that the foundation of the creation is love.”*

The foundation of the creation is love. Our faith calls us to love. Love is powerful and complicated and messy. And yet, like it or not, love propels us at this very moment in our common life to tell hard truths. The work of emancipation is not over. The work of dismantling structural racism and defeating white supremacy presses on us with fierce urgency. Our African American brothers and sisters have been in pain for a long time, and it is up to us to ease that pain because in the end, none of us are free until all of us are free. Amen.