

A Day to Remember

Exodus 13:3, 8-10

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

June 20, 2021

Yesterday, as everyone knows, was the first observance of a new federal holiday, Juneteenth, the celebration of the day -- June 19, 1865 -- when the last enslaved people in America were informed that they were free. You know that better than most, the announcement was made in Galveston.

To be honest, the passage of the legislation by Congress making Juneteenth a federal holiday took me by surprise. I don't know if I just wasn't paying attention, or if it happened so fast that a lot of people were surprised.

My sermon was finished when I heard the news. At first, I thought I would just make a few remarks. Then I decided that the occasion deserved more attention, so I am going to preach on "A Day to Remember," rather than the sermon and text that are listed in your worship bulletin.

Apologies to Jon Snyder for this late substitution. Jon works hard to create worship services that are faithful to the lectionary and follow a theme.

In my defense, I will say that I am following in the footsteps of Jerry Schmucker, the former blacksmith turned self-taught Baptist country preacher who was my pastor when I was a child and youth. He once told me that it had been his experience that where sermon preparation is concerned, "The Lord tends to lead late in the week."

Hear the reading of scripture, Exodus 13:3, 8-10.

Moses said to the people, 'Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery . . . You shall tell your child on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.' It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the Lord may be on your lips; for with such a strong hand the Lord brought you out of Egypt. You shall keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year.

Yesterday Nikki, my son Jonathan and I spent the afternoon in a park in downtown Winston-Salem with several thousand of our closest friends in a "celebration of freedom and the will to be free." Juneteenth.

There was a carnival atmosphere -- snow cones, Italian ice, food trucks. Speeches, panel discussions. A local jazz performer sang Billie Holliday. Teenaged writers performed original works under the banner: "Poetic Journey through Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter."

The CEO of the sponsoring arts council said, "This festival is not just about enjoyment, but about affirmation, healing, and remembering stories of a people with a will to live."

My mind turned quite naturally to another people with a "will to live," a people who also aided memory by setting aside a day to remember.

After the people of Israel escaped slavery in Egypt and trudged two hundred miles through the desert, they came to Mt. Sinai, the mountain where Moses had earlier met God.

We know that on the sacred mountain Moses was given the Ten Commandments and the Law. A couple of other things happened on Mt. Sinai that are not so well known.

One of those things is that Moses created a new calendar. *“This month,”* he told the people, this month of our freedom, *“shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.”* (Exodus 12:1) From this day forward, Moses said, all things will be dated from the month of our liberation. That would be like saying that beginning in 1776 July 4 would be New Year’s Day in America, which would make a certain kind of nationalistic sense.

Then Moses, who understood the power of narrative and symbol and knew the importance of memory in maintaining unity among a people over time, selected a day in that first month as a day to remember the *“strong hand (with which) the Lord brought you out of Egypt.”*

The most prominent feature of that day was to be a commemorative meal that celebrated the night the death angel passed over the homes of Jews while visiting death on the homes of Egyptians. The Passover meal was to be observed within the family for that is where the death angel struck. Symbolic foods were intended to remind Jews generations, centuries, millenia later of the harsh experience of slavery.

“You shall keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year.” That ordinance and the memories of slavery and freedom miraculously won have been kept every year for 3,000 years.

The experience of slavery forever seared itself into the collective memory of ancient Israel. It made its way into the most surprising place -- Israel’s lawbooks -- as a rationale for laws that protected “widows, orphans and aliens.” *“The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself,”* Why? Because *“you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”* (Leviticus 19:34-35) You know what it is like to be a stranger: *“You know the heart of a stranger.”*

One might wish that the law had gone further, that it had declared that enslaving another human being is an abomination in the eyes of God. But the truth is that the law allowed Jews to own other human beings. Some laws even permitted Jews to own other Jews.

Still, Jewish law went to remarkable lengths to humanize an inherently inhumane practice. For example, if an owner struck an enslaved servant and knocked out the servant’s tooth, the servant had to be granted freedom “to compensate for the tooth.” (Exodus 21:27) That law is in the section that includes the better known “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” which was intended to make retaliation proportional, but in this case, it was not a tooth for a tooth; it was freedom for a tooth.

But no matter how you cut it, slavery was slavery. It was ugly, it was dehumanizing, it was cruel.

For example, in Jewish law, if an owner of enslaved people allowed a male to marry, the woman and any children born to the couple belonged to the owner. If the enslaved man was freed, the law said, “He shall go out alone.” He had to leave his wife and family behind. He could choose to remain with his wife and child, but if he did he

forfeited his opportunity to ever regain his freedom. (Exodus 21:2f) He and his family were enslaved for life.

Lest you think, “Ah, but that is the Old Testament, back when God was mean,” nowhere in the New Testament is slavery condemned. The subject is addressed several times, but in each case, it is to advise Christians who owned enslaved people on how to treat them and to instruct Christians who had been enslaved on how to act.

The somewhat mixed treatment of slavery in the Bible notwithstanding, enslaved people in the American South saw themselves and their story in the exodus story of the Jews.

Harriet Tubman, who escaped slavery only to return time after time to bring her family and then others first to the North and later to Canada was called Moses, for she led her people to freedom. Enslaved people sang of the Jews’ enslavement and their yearning for freedom, but at the same time they were singing of their own longing for liberation.

*“Go down, Moses, (Go down Harriet)
way down in Egypt land.
Tell ol’ Pharaoh, let my people go.”*

When the Civil War ended, formerly enslaved people in America chose a day to remember just as the ancient Jews had done. They chose the day the last enslaved people in America were told that they were free -- June 19.

I think we should be careful how we phrase that. I think we should say that on June 19, 1865 a Union army general was sent to tell the enslaved people in Texas what white people had known all along and were trying to keep secret. Come on. Don’t you think white people knew the war had been over for two and a half months? The rest of the country found out by telegraph. Confederate veterans were coming home, for crying out loud.

Nonetheless, that is the day that was chosen as a day to remember.

In pre-Civil War debates about slavery abolitionists relied on great, broad scriptural principles in their opposition to slavery, like the image of God in all people and love your neighbor as yourself. There is one principle that I have never seen cited, and that surprises me, because it gets to the heart of the issue. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul said, *“For freedom Christ has set us free,” (Galatians 5:1)* Sounds redundant, doesn’t it?

It was my privilege twenty or so years ago to play a very small part in getting a man released from prison for committing a murder that DNA evidence proved he didn’t commit.

During the years of the struggle no one said, “Daryl Hunt should be set free so he can go to school and get a degree.” No one said, “He needs to be set free so he can get a job and support his family.” Daryl Hunt needed to be set free so he could be free. You don’t have to justify setting a person free by appealing to a higher principle. There is no higher principle. Being free is its own justification. Because being free is an essential element in what it means to be human. Christ set us free so we can be free, so we can be fully human.

That scripture, that principle, destroys any argument that slavery was God-ordained or that somehow it was beneficial to those who spent their entire lives in bondage to other human beings. A woman in Montgomery, Alabama argued to us over breakfast just three years ago that Africans were better off enslaved in America than free in Africa. As if freedom was optional for human beings, as if being free is not essential to being human.

In a couple of weeks, we will celebrate July 4, the day the American colonies declared their independence from England. We call it Independence Day. Appropriately so, politically speaking. But it was not Independence Day for the enslaved people throughout the colonies, who numbered 700,000 in the 1790 census. Their independence was denied even in our first constitution.

Nor was their independence gained on January 1, 1863 when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation; it applied only to enslaved people who lived in the states that had seceded, states that, needless to say, did not recognize Lincoln's authority. Plus, it did not apply to enslaved people who lived in the four slave-holding states that did not secede or to enslaved people who lived in areas taken by Union forces early in the war – New Orleans, for example.

It was not until June 19, 1865, and six months later when the US Constitution was amended to make slavery unlawful that the promise of July 4, 1776 was fulfilled. If there is a birthday of freedom in America, it is Juneteenth.

Which is why yesterday across America people remembered and sang:

*Oh freedom, oh freedom
Oh freedom over me.
And before I'll be a slave
I'll be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord
And be free.*

Let the words of Paul serve as our benediction: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery." Grace and peace. Amen.