

What is Juneteenth to the Son of a Slaveowner?

Acts 16:16-24

Second Sunday after Pentecost, (June 19) 2022

Juneteenth

Kyle Childress

Alas, we are paying the price for what we did to our brother.

-Genesis 42:21

[White people] are in effect still trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.

-James Baldwin

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

-William Faulkner

On July 5, 1852, Frederick Douglass gave a famous speech in Rochester, NY entitled, "What, to the Slave, is the Fourth of July?" It was then and is now a very powerful speech. In the speech, Douglass celebrates the great men who declared themselves a new nation absolved from the tyranny of the British Crown, as he said, "to the dismay of the lovers of ease, and the worshipers of property."

Then he adds a "but," and it is a strong and powerful "but." He says, "I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! ... This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn." The rest of his speech is a strong and stirring indictment of slavery and the difference in how slaves view the 4th of July from White people. This is a great speech of American history, and you need to read it for yourself or hear excerpts of it on YouTube.

This Juneteenth morning, I am keenly aware of that juxtaposition of a White man and preacher bringing a word on Juneteenth. Let us pray it is a word from the Lord.

Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day and Emancipation Day, is when we celebrate slavery was over. President Abraham Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation effective January 1, 1863, that all slaves in states that had seceded were now free from slavery. But the news of that freedom was not announced in Texas until June 19, 1865, when Union Major General George Gordon proclaimed it in Galveston, Texas, with Texas being the last state to proclaim this news. It was not until December 6, 1865, that the 13th Amendment to the Constitution was officially ratified thereby outlawing slavery throughout the United States. But on June 19, 1866, former slaves in Texas, now known as freedmen, began to celebrate and remember their freedom on what was already being called Juneteenth. Over time, this commemoration spread across the South and now throughout the country. Last year President Biden made it an official federal holiday.

Since Frederick Douglass asked, what is the Fourth of July to the slave, I ask this morning, what is Juneteenth to the son of a slaveowner? Of course, I'm not the immediate son of a slaveowner but I am the descendent of slaveowners, especially on my Childress side, and I am an inheritor of the privileges and influence and even wealth of those slaveowners. So what does Juneteenth have to say to me, and those of us in similar circumstances?

The Black woman activist and poet, Audre Lorde, wrote, "I am myself – a Black woman warrior poet doing my work – come to ask you, are you doing

yours?” (cited in *Healing Haunted Histories*, by Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, p. 18). That’s our task. To do our own work as Christians and as mostly White people who have much work to do. God in Christ is at work transforming us into who God wants us to be. This work of the Holy Spirit is both gift and task. It is gift because it is the free grace of God, and it is task because we must participate and join in for it to be realized and embodied. We have work to do. We always have work to do if we are faithful to Christ.

So, let’s start our work this morning in Acts 16, where Luke writes that Paul and Silas had come to Philippi. On the Sabbath they go down to the riverside outside of town where there is an apparently small counter-cultural community of women who gather for prayer, under the leadership of Lydia, a successful businesswoman in the textile business. She and these women were known as “God-fearers,” meaning that they worshiped the God Yahweh, but were female Gentiles who were not allowed in the synagogue.

Paul and Silas share the news of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, which had happened some 20 years before, but, though the news has been delayed, these women hear this good news and believe. They want to join this movement of God, and they’re all baptized. Lydia’s house becomes the central meeting place of what is now, the church in Phillippi, and Paul and Silas are invited to stay there.

The next day or two Paul and Silas go into town and this enslaved girl starts following them around. Luke tells us she had the “spirit of divination.” In other words, she is doubly enslaved. She is in bondage to a demonic spirit, while also being in bondage to successful entrepreneurs for whom she makes money telling fortunes. Making a pest of herself but also attracting money-making crowds, she

shouts everywhere Paul and Silas go, “These men are working for God. They’re telling the way of salvation!”

Let’s pause a moment and think on this. What’s the connection of successful money-making religion and enslavement and the Demonic Power of Death and Despair? What the young woman says, “These men are working for God and proclaiming the way of salvation,” is a fact, but it is being used to make money and it is in truth, the very opposite of the good news of Christ and salvation as liberation. In the context, what she says is falsehood. Just because we’re successful at shouting “Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!” and “Get saved! Get saved! Get saved!” does not make it the good news Jesus proclaimed. As one of my old teachers in seminary used to say, “Just because people come running like pigs to slop, does not make it the gospel.” In this story, this young woman is enslaved to money-makers but also to the spirit of Deathly Despair.

Paul gets tired of all this. Luke says, he was annoyed. He was fed up with listening to this money-making, enslaved god-talk, so he turns and says, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out of her!” and the spirit of Death and Despair does so. She is freed from that demonic bondage, but it also means she can’t tell fortunes anymore. The days of making money from her enslavement are over for her owners, and they do not like it! Man, oh man, are they angry!

As Frederick Douglass said, “to the dismay of the lovers of ease, and the worshipers of property” liberation from slavery is not good news.

Let’s pause again. I like to quote Rabbi Edwin Friedman, a pioneer in family systems work, who said, “Our society is functioning like a chronically anxious

family.” And one of the characteristics of anxiety is that one little incident, one remark, one action is like striking a match to ignite an explosion. So, we have a way of life, existing and getting by, that might be full of oppression, intimidation, and even violence and trauma. Maybe we’re pretty successful, we make money, and perhaps we’re even religious. Perhaps for most of our history we deny anything is wrong. The slave girls working for us, want to work for us, we say. What we’re doing is free enterprise and we’re giving her a good job, but we live with the underlying chronic anxiety that someday it’ll all come apart. So, we circle the wagons, fight to remain in control, blame others, so we can be clear that “we” are not like “them.” And we get angry. As more than one writer points out, denial almost invariably leads to trauma. One day, the demons get out, the denial faces reality, and what feels like chaos and loss, sets loose anger and rage (see *Healing Haunted Histories*, p. 89).

I think it is interesting that journalist Naomi Klein says, “Climate change isn’t just about things getting hotter and wetter” [or hotter and drier in other places]: “under our current economic and political order, it’s about things getting meaner and uglier” (*On Fire: The (Burning) Case for a Green New Deal*, p. 165).

Our current economic and political order is in denial about climate change. The money-making economic system is threatened and especially the people of power are enraged. We cannot let the demons loose! We must get our guns, circle the wagons, hunker down and bunker up, and we must shout the others down.

So, owners of the enslaved girl whip the crowd up in an angry frenzy. “These men are outsider agitators who are upsetting our Philippian way of life! Make Phillipi great again and take our country back!”

Before you know it, Paul and Silas are beaten up by the mob – maybe the mob is wearing white hoods or maybe they’re wearing Proud Boys t-shirts and waving Johnny Reb and “Come and Take It” flags, but they nearly lynch Paul and Silas. The judge throws Paul and Silas in jail, likely while the money-makers, in black tie and tuxes, sipping expensive Scotch, confer overnight with the town politicians about what to do with them.

Meanwhile, God is at work. Paul and Silas are singing hymns and praying. One of the reasons we teach and practice praying and hymn singing every Sunday morning, is so that at the midnights of our lives, when we feel hemmed-in and overwhelmed with darkness and despair, we will know how to pray and sing hymns from memory, from our heart. We start singing hymns and praying at midnight, and God might get loose! Things happen! The foundations start shaking. And as our sisters and brothers in the black church like to say, “God finds a way out of no way.”

That’s what happens with Paul and Silas. Everyone in the prison hear Paul and Silas singing and praying. An earthquake happens, the doors are opened, and everyone is set free from their chains. Salvation is happening. The jailer, who also lives in that old dark and despairing prison, is afraid. What’s happening? What am I going to do? What’s going to happen to me when the private prison corporate executives find out? Or when the plantation owners find out? Imprisoned in despair, he is about to kill himself, when Paul and Silas are able to talk him down, “Wait, don’t do it! We have not run off. We’re still here.”

Everyone goes outside, jailer, prisoners, Paul and Silas all go out into the fresh night air. The jailer asks, “What do I need to do to be saved? To be freed

from enslavement?” And Paul and Silas lead him and his entire household, and everyone and anyone else, to be baptized into this spreading movement of God setting people free from bondage.

The next morning, the people in power see the power is shifting and send word, “Y’all can go. Just be quiet, don’t do any interviews or go on social media. Leave town and don’t come back. Mistakes were made.” But Paul and Silas will not go quietly or cooperate with this system of silence. “This is not about an isolated incident or about few bad apples. This is about an entire system of shadows, and silence, and evil. It is time for this systemic darkness to see the light of justice and truth.” Paul reminds the politicians that he and Silas are Roman citizens and since he and Silas were beaten and humiliated in public, they demand a public apology. And lo, and behold, the politicians do so.

So, on this Juneteenth morning what do we do with this story? Where are we in it? Are we Paul and Silas, proclaiming and sharing the news that God sets us free from enslavement? Or perhaps we’re the slave owners, and sons and daughters of slave owners, who are not happy that our lucrative capitalism built on cheap labor is being subverted? Maybe we’re among the crowd living in denial and who are scared and anxious that everything seems to be changing and we need to blame someone and make everything stable again? Perhaps we’re the enslaved girl or her descendent, and we’re wondering whatever happened me? I’m not even heard from in the story anymore. Or what about the others who were imprisoned?

I do know this. These stories stay with us. William Faulkner famously said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” And James Baldwin, specifically speaking of White people said that they “are in effect still trapped in a history

which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.”

Slavery in America since 1619 haunts us, racism is in our bones. Trauma studies show that traumas like slavery and racism and violence are not simply individual mental and emotional illnesses. They are social and systemic, intergenerational, and embodied. Even our DNA is shaped and mis-shaped, formed and malformed over generations by these principalities and powers.

Theologically and spiritually, systemic evil and sin, traumatic racism continues over time and is pervasive and universal. We call it original sin. One of the greatest 19th century preachers, Phillips Brooks, said shortly after Abraham Lincoln’s death that slavery was but a “sacrament.” In other words, slavery was but the outward sign of something dark and sinister in our society always looking for ways to get out. Slavery itself passed away, but the underlying demon shifts its shape into other forms – White Supremacy, official police violence, the prison system, poverty and on and on.

We cannot be saved, liberated from however we choose to state it – trauma, racism, demons, original sin – until we name it, face it, and confess it. Denial just prolongs the enslavement and the evil. The gospel is that in Jesus Christ we are set free from enslavement. In Christ there is New Creation where we embody forgiveness and healing and freedom and where we are held accountable by one another. We are to keep living into the New Creation in Christ that heals and forgives and frees and not relapse into Sin and Death, trauma and despair and racism and abuse.

Trauma studies have taught us that the basic response to trauma is “fight or flight” and then they have added “freeze” to the initial options of trauma. Most of these studies were done post-World War II and were done almost entirely on men and mostly on men returning from the battlefield, not only from WWII but also from Vietnam and the Persian Gulf. The assumption has been that women would respond in the same ways.

But more recent research shows that women, when facing danger, respond differently. Apparently, more in women than in men, there is a release of the brain chemical (oxytocin) which mobilizes a response that “tends” by looking after the young and “befriends” by supporting and protecting one another (cited in *Healing Haunted Histories*, p. 119).

I’ve learned from some of you that tending and befriending in response to trauma can result in women staying in abusive relationships. Yet, at the same time, tending and befriending can be a gift of God.

Which makes me wonder about our story from Acts. The story is framed by Lydia and her group of praying women. It starts at Lydia’s house and ends at Lydia’s house. At the end of the story, it says that Paul and Silas go back to Lydia’s home. It’s Lydia’s home that has become the gathering spot for this brand-new Philippian church. And based upon what we read this morning, gathering there are not only Paul and Silas, but also the jailer and his household and family, ex-cons from the prison, and perhaps even an ex-slave-girl. All tended and befriended by Lydia and all those praying women. Part of the tending means it is also a community of the New Creation which holds each other accountable, including and especially jailers and sons and daughters of slave owners who must

learn to live into these new relationships of equality and dignity and mutual respect in Christ.

I don't think it is an accident that this Philippian church becomes Paul's favorite and from what we know, among the strongest and best of the New Testament churches.

Such a community of prayer and tending and befriending becomes a sacrament of the grace of God. Through such a mishmash of disciples of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, works and spreads throughout a broken world. May it be so with us.

Through the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, mother of us all. Amen.