

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

On Juneteenth

2 Corinthians 5.18-20

June 20, 2021

God through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation . . . We are ambassadors for Christ.

They didn't feel much like ambassadors that day; more like children afraid of their own shadows. As the long day came to an end, Jesus said, "Let us cross over to the other side of the lake." The disciples dutifully piled into a small boat to make the journey. This was not an unusual thing for them. They were used to going back and forth across the large lake. Though dangers always lurk anytime you're on the water.

On this night a storm came up. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so the boat was already being swamped. We know a little what that feels like, metaphorically speaking. It's the experience of feeling like you're in a small boat in the middle of a big storm that I'm thinking about this morning when I think about the events of last summer.

By this time last summer, one year ago, metaphorically speaking, we were far from anywhere our feet could land on solid ground. We might think of last summer as being in a little boat in the middle of Lake Covid, a wine dark sea we were all trying just to get across, not even sure where we'd find the farthest shore. And then just when we were in the middle of the sea a great windstorm came up. A terrible tempest. The whirlwind of racial trauma. It was a storm of severe reckoning.

These are hard things to remember, but we must. And we must name them.

Lightning cracked on March 13 when Breonna Taylor was killed in her home by police.

On May 5, lightning flashed as the video of the murder of Ahmaud Arbery—the young man running through a neighborhood, was released. Then the thunder rolled on May 25th, the day George Floyd was killed by police.

Boom. Boom. Boom. One after another. By the end of May, protest marches filled the streets of American cities including two peaceful demonstrations in downtown Waco. Cries for mercy rose into the night.

The loudest cry wasn't from white Christians in their little boats. The cry was from hearts like ships breaking apart in the darkness of that night: black brothers and sisters all across the nation. Even anyone who didn't have eyes to see could not stop their ears from hearing the plaintive and accusing cries: "Do you not care that we are perishing?"

I'm not sure we all knew what to say or what to do. Do we speak or listen? Do we march or stay out of the way? Should we be encouraged or afraid? But we knew we did not have the power

to command this storm to be still. This storm was beyond any of our power. It raged with a fiercely, holy anger. We tried to listen. We read and prayed together. We listened. We knelt with one another shoulder to shoulder in the broken heart of our city. And many of us did what we did or tried to do what we did or felt what we felt or prayed what we prayed just exactly because we are Christians and were trying to know what is a Christian to do?

The Apostle Paul insists that because we have been reconciled with God in Christ, we now have the ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation is a relationship word. To reconcile is to bring together what is torn apart, to repair relationships that are broken; restore friendships that are severed. To heal what is wounded.

It is also to reconcile all that is with the ideal of all that should be. We have the ministry of reconciliation.

Our nation's founders said so eloquently and so powerfully what should be: a people who recognize that all men, all men and women, are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Thomas Jefferson penned those words, those ideals, The ideals that still shine as a light inspiring the world. And they still call us to an ideal not yet lived out fully in our relationships nor the structures of the nation birthed in ideals and ideas, in words and in war, in freedom and in the very thing that undermined freedom. What should be never yet has been.

Nothing so belies the terrible irreconciliation of American ideals with American reality as the enslavement of men and women by other men and women. And yet, this was a reality for decades, at the birth of this nation. Sometimes I try to imagine what it would be like to be taken from the family, place, and way of life I know, forced away, and then treated like I was owned by someone else and forced to work for him every day. My identity stripped; my life taken from me. I can hardly imagine it. I can't imagine what it must have been like for one minute of one day to have my humanity taken from me, made an object for another man to use, abuse, and discard as he sees fit.

Jefferson owned slaves. He owned those people. His amazing life, his brilliant mind, his extraordinary accomplishments, his Monticello were made possible by the 600 black bodies he controlled. We've always been unsure what to do with Jefferson's legacy. Even 20 years ago at Monticello, when we lived there in Charlottesville, you'd hardly hear a whisper about Sally Hemmings and only passing mention of the lives of the slaves. It was a footnote I suppose embarrassed and shamed them. The reality of Jefferson diminished the myth of Jefferson and I suppose they were afraid of that.

It's remarkable what's changed in 20 years. Now, on a tour of Monticello, which we took a couple years ago, they acknowledged the complexity of Jefferson's accomplishments and failures, the triumphs and tragedies of it all, of us all. It was a more honest account. It was a truer account. Instead of pretending it didn't happen, they helped us look at it all square in the eye. The tour was better for it. We were all better for it.

The complexity of that acknowledgement is at the heart of the American experience when we tell the truth, and, sadly, yet truthfully, we must tell the church's complicity with it. Jefferson famously cut out the miracles from the Gospels in his personal Bible. He must have taken his blade to Exodus and to Galatians and to 2 Corinthians 5 as well, and he might as well have taken a knife to the heart of Christianity. In some ways, he made some deep cuts. Jefferson supported the flourishing of religion in America and the freedom of the church from the state and the state from the church. He thought Christianity was good and was good for America because, he believed, the church makes better citizens.

We can only assume that the church making better citizens was a church that made citizens who were quietly complicit in slaveholding. Complicit pastors kept the people in the pews quiet. And because they were quiet, they themselves carved the liberating heart of the Gospel out of their faith so the nation of which they were good citizens could go on living in the irreconcilable irreconciliation of its ideals from its reality. And good Christians could go on saying, in the Gospel there are no slave nor free, but outside the church walls, well, that's the state not the church.

The southern writer William Faulkner said the past is never dead. It's not even past. Wendell Berry, the Kentucky Baptist farmer known more for reconciliation between humans and the land sees clearly the need for healing of racial rifts past and present on all the land. Berry strongly makes the point that it's a gross political oversimplification to say that for four hundred years black people in America have been miserable and that by making them miserable white people have made themselves happy (Hidden Wound, 63). These are two gross oversimplifications, Berry says. Rather, this division rooted deep in our soil and soul as a people diminishes us all.

It diminishes us all, and it certainly divides us all, though we're trying. I think we're genuinely trying. It seems to me that last summer's raging storm roused American Christians. I don't mean at all to say that suddenly we're doing everything right, or that no one harbors racist thoughts anymore, or that we have clear and obvious answers to hard questions about reparations, police funding, university admission processes, or taxes... What I am saying is that I've never before experienced any group of people sitting down and talking together about Color, Compromise, the Church's complicity in racism, and praying confession. It was a start. It was a stirring. A stirring on the streets of our cities, around dinner tables, and in the heartfelt prayers of thousands, millions across the country of every race. Maybe it was as simple as the prayer: *Lord, help me care that my brothers and sisters are perishing and I now see that we all perish together. Lord, let this storm blow in a fresh wind of your Spirit.*

One thing we heard, "Do not say peace, peace when there is no justice. Do not shout freedom, freedom when there is no freedom."

For four score and seven years, this nation proclaimed liberty and practiced slavery. On January 1, 1863, President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation which freed slaves in the

confederate states, which meant that it's worth was symbolic more than effectual. But symbols matter.

It was two and a half years, 2.5 years later that Maj. General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas, the last outpost of slavery in America. The last place where slaves learned they'd been set free. On June 19, 1865, Granger went from street corner to corner to the local church and read General Order 3, "The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor."

89 years after the declaration of independence declared all are made equal...

2.5 years after the Emancipation proclamation ended slavery...

2 months after the Civil War began to end...

Those blessed words filled the ears of men and women—God's children, made in the divine image-- who had been treated as property, bought and sold, whipped and raped, beaten and killed—four words: *all slaves are free*. It was long overdue, but how sweet the sound. It was a sound that saved the wretchedness of us all.

You well know, as do I, that hinge of history did not swing the door wide to justice, love, peace, or total freedom. You know, as do I, that the road to justice is a long, uphill road winding through our past and our present. You know, as do I, that the work is not done in us, among us, or by us.

But we also know this, a good work was started that God is still bringing to completion. And this is something to celebrate. A year after Maj. General Granger's visit to Galveston, former slaves started celebrating Juneteenth as a day of emancipation, a day of jubilee. Celebrations of Juneteenth began in Texas and spread from there to communities all over the nation. I thought it was only a Texas thing, but I was talking with someone from a town called Saugatuck, Michigan. He said there's a community up there, way up there, that has held Juneteenth celebrations every summer.

One celebrant says this, "Juneteenth is a moment to pause our everyday lives and mark a truly joyful celebration. But it's also a chance to ask ourselves some fundamental questions: What does it mean to not just survive but to thrive? How can love make us stronger? How do we nourish our bodies and our spirits?"

I want to be very careful as a white man, a white pastor, largely among white Christians not to appropriate Juneteenth and make it our own in some way. But those are Gospel questions! Those are reconciliation questions. Within celebration, fundamental questions: *what does it mean not just to survive but to thrive? How can love make us stronger? How do we nourish our bodies and our spirits?* And to those, let us add two more: "*How are we partners in thriving,*

love, and nourishment. And how are we complicit in diminishment, hatred, or irreconciliation?"
We need someone to show us the way.

You know of Jefferson and the complicated legacy of his declaration and Lincoln and the paper tiger of his Emancipation Proclamation. And you now know of Granger and his perfunctory General Order 3.

You may not know the name Opal Lee. Opal Lee, a self-described "grandmother in tennis shoes." Mrs. Lee was born in Marshall, deep in east Texas. When she was 15, a mob of 500 white men came to her house at night while her father was at work. They brought torches and they set her house on fire and burned it to the ground. The Lees had moved into the wrong neighborhood. When her father arrived, the police, who'd stood by watching all of this without intervening, told him if he did anything they would turn him over to the mob. He had to stand there with his family and watch their home burn to the ground while others mocked their anger and grief.

Mrs. Lee moved shortly after that and still lives in Ft. Worth, my hometown. For years, she's helped organized Juneteenth celebrations in Ft. Worth and around the state and some places around the nation. That wasn't enough for her, in 2016, at the age of 89 on the morning of June 19th, she started a mission to walk from Ft. Worth to Washington DC to advocate for Juneteenth as a national holiday. That day she walked 2.5 miles to honor the 2.5 years her forefathers and foremothers were enslaved after the Emancipation Proclamation and the day they were set free. She's walked each June 19th since then and many days in between.

She's travelled all across the country speaking to churches and school groups. She wrote a children's book. The art on the cover shows a grandma in a rocking chair reading a book called Juneteenth to children at her feet. They are black and brown and white, all together, as God's children should be and can be, at least if you ask Opal Lee. Mrs. Lee is 94 years old now. She looks great, and she's still walking. And this week, her dream became reality with the establishment of Juneteenth National Independence Day celebrating the end of slavery. When asked in an interview how she felt when she heard the news, she said, "It's like the young people say, it was off the chain!" It's the first new national holiday established since 1983, when Martin Luther King Day was established. I think he'd be pleased.

I think he'd join a celebration. I think he'd also say, the road goes on. Let us walk it together, arm in arm with Mrs. Opal Lee, with John Lewis, with Rosa Parks, with Frederick Douglas, and Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Major Gen Granger, and Lincoln... And then, let us take the hand of Jefferson and say to him, "Come on with us. It's not too late. You talked the talk. It's time to walk the walk."

Let the church lead the way. You are ambassadors for Jesus Christ. Imperfect, broken, sinful, redeemed. Claimed by the one who calls us onward with a wink and a nudge and a question to all huddled against the storms: why are you still so afraid? Have you no faith?

Yes, you do. You do have faith. Faith is within you. You have faith, hope, and love. You have the Spirit, and you are in Christ. And you live at such a time as this, a season of justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, whose fresh wind blows sometimes as a whisper and sometimes as a storm and sometimes like a preacher-king's thundering cadence and sometimes like a delightful giggle of a grandma in tennis shoes. The Spirit blows where it will. You don't know where it comes from or where it's going. So it is with everyone being reborn in Christ. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. All is being made new. May it be so in us by the power of the one who walks on water, stills storms, raises the dead to new life, breaks bread for thousands and turns water to wine.

Thanks be to God.

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