

Juneteenth: Long Wait For Freedom

Tomorrow is Juneteenth. The date commemorates the formal abolition of African slavery in America and is widely celebrated in black communities nationwide. Of course slavery nominally ended with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, but every school child knows that Lincoln's executive order had little practical effect. Even after Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia surrendered at Appomattox in April two years later, some Southern generals continued to fight on. The last held out until early June. Then it was another two weeks before the Union commander Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston to take possession of Texas on behalf of the federal government, announcing the next day on June 19th that all slaves were henceforth free and, in the words of "General Order No. 3" that "this involves an absolute equality of personal rights and property rights" between the races.

The Civil War had been won. The great moral stain on our nation's principles had finally been eradicated. But the more things changed, the more they remained the same. Within a dozen years, Granger had been transferred to the nearby territory of New Mexico, and the last federal troops were removed from what had been the Confederacy. African American citizens were rapidly disenfranchised. So-called "black codes" enacted by all white legislatures in the former Dixie criminalized vagrancy, loitering and created other imaginary offenses designed to conscript blacks into chain gangs and unpaid labor camps, or forcing them into economic peonage to their former masters. These evolved into Jim Crow, a legal caste system defined by the color line, with segregated education, laws forbidding miscegenation or social mixing of the races, and jobs limited to the most menial duties of farm work or housework with an attitude of subservience enforced by vigilante campaigns of lynching and terror directed at any who resisted. Seeking a better life, millions migrated north during the 1920's and 30's but found discrimination in housing and employment as bleak as anything encountered south of the Mason-Dixon. The new boss was hardly better than the old one. And the more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

It took a generation of struggle and sacrifice and a massive mobilization of the nation's conscience to end Jim Crow. The decade between Brown v. Board of Education that struck down "separate but equal" and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that finally gave the ballot to millions of citizens who had never had a voice in their own governance was a legal and moral watershed for America. But the ink was hardly dry on those landmark documents and decisions before President Richard Nixon declared a "war on drugs" which was nothing more than a thinly

disguised assault on civil rights, as former Nixon policy advisor John Erlichman admitted in an interview with *Harper's Magazine* just last year. "The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people," according to Mister Erlichman.

You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin. And then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.

The war on drugs and the assault on black lives only intensified in the decades that followed, so that between Nixon and the Obama years the number of prisoners being held in state and federal lock-ups increased tenfold, making America the most incarcerated society on earth, with a disproportionate number of those inmates having darker skin. Meaning that today, in 2017, a young black man has a better chance of going to jail than of going to college. Meaning that currently ten percent of African American males in their thirties are behind bars on any given day. Meaning that there are more black men in prison now than were being held in slavery at the outbreak of the Civil War. And being a felon means losing your right to vote in most jurisdictions, forfeiting your right to serve on a jury. Six million otherwise eligible citizens are disenfranchised because they plead guilty to possession of marijuana or some other charge; maybe they actually were guilty, or maybe they just confessed because the overworked Public Defender didn't have time or money to run a jury trial and the local Prosecutor looking to climb the political ladder threatened a maximum sentence unless they copped a plea. Six million is a lot of votes, more than enough to swing a national election. It's more than enough to elect a Donald Trump and turn Jeff Sessions into the Attorney General of the United States, Sessions who after a brief downturn in incarceration rates has pledged to double down on the war on drugs, who said he thought the Ku Klux Klan were mostly "good ole boys" until he discovered that some of them were smoking dope.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. In case you haven't noticed, tomorrow is Juneteenth, but we are still waiting for "General Order No. 3" with its promise of "absolute equality of personal rights" to be enforced. The two-tier institution of first class citizenship for white America and three-fifths citizenship for blacks has shifted from days when slavery was written into our

national Constitution, because the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed involuntary servitude (“except as punishment for crime,” a crucial loophole). So now we have the new Jim Crow of mass incarceration, which author Michelle Alexander argues is even more stigmatizing than the old Jim Crow, as being labeled a criminal bears an even heavier onus of shame than the former offense of just being colored. The more things change ...

And in case you haven’t noticed, the Civil War didn’t end in 1865. It’s still being fought. When New Orleans started removing Confederate war memorials last month, the workers running the cranes had to wear body armor and face masks to protect themselves against armed hooligans waving the Stars and Bars. And when it’s not being fought in the streets, it’s being fought in classrooms in places like Texas, the very last holdout against the Union armies, which still has a Jeff Davis County but no Lincoln County, and where textbooks until recently described black slaves as merely “migrant workers.”

Is it any wonder that black folks in this country are sick and tired of feeling sick and tired? I think there is a deep frustration among African Americans today, justifiably. And there is a growing impatience with the pace of change when the more things change ... well, you know the chorus.

It is this frustration we are seeing today within our own denomination, which since 1997, for the last twenty years, has made fighting racism a top priority. I shared with you this morning the resolution our General Assembly passed that year, one shortly followed by another on “Escalating Inequality, Poverty and Racism,” with other statements on “Alternatives to the War on Drugs,” and “Reforming a Criminal Justice System in Crisis.” These words were all backed by action. We elected our first African American President, Bill Sinkford, in 2001, followed by our first Latino President, Peter Morales, in 2009. The denomination funded a diversity of ministry initiative to recruit more clergy of color into our leadership, while congregations in search were required to participate in “Beyond Categorical Thinking” workshops designed to dismantle stereotypes of who their next minister might be or what they might look like. Beacon Press, our publishing arm, became a leader in bringing black intellectuals like Cornell West into prominence, while we promoted works like Michelle Alexander’s *New Jim Crow* as our denominational read. We named and honored “Breakthrough Congregations” like Davies Memorial Church in Prince Georges County, Maryland, a formerly white suburb of Washington D.C. that changing demographics gradually turned black. Yet Davies Memorial adapted and is today

one of our few truly multiracial congregations, with over a third of its membership identifying as African American.

One of a very few such congregations, as I said. Because the more things change ... Our congregations remain stubbornly homogenous in their make up, just like our neighbor St. James, just like the Presbyterian church up the road, just like the United Church of Christ. Dr. King remarked more than sixty years ago that Sunday morning at 11 am is the most segregated hour in American life, and the truth of it endures. The UU World reported in 2010 that the people in our pews are 89% white, 1% black, 3% Latino, 3% Asian, and 4% multiracial. And the UUA, our national organization, reflects that vanilla-flavored demography. 86% of the senior staff in Boston are white. Or were white until recently, when our Latino President abruptly resigned, and several other white staffers quit (reportedly under pressure) with three new African American co-presidents appointed to replace them in the interim. The last three months have been tumultuous, with accusations of bias hurled against our elected leaders and calls for dismantling the culture of white supremacy allegedly lurking close to the heart of our faith.

All of it saddens me, though I understand the anger and vehemence of the critics. I grew up in this faith, raised in the All Souls Unitarian Church of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Tulsa is one of the most backward cities in the United States and one of the most bigoted, home to the worst race riot in American history, which in 1921 left over 300 African American residents dead and the black community of Greenwood in ashes, destroyed by white mobs enraged by rumors that a black elevator boy had looked lustfully at a white female white passenger. I recall my grandfather talking about the riot briefly one evening at the dinner table, remembering the machine gun nests set atop buildings downtown, but we never studied the history in our classrooms, which were entirely segregated by race even in 1972, the year I graduated from Edison High. There was not a single black pupil in my graduating cohort of over 500 students. My minister at All Souls, John Wolf, stared down the Tulsa School Board until they fired the superintendent who was defying court orders to integrate, and Nancy Bowen, a longtime member of the church helped create the first magnet schools in town that began to bring kids from the south side together with those from across the tracks. And yet the Sunday School I attended at All Souls was as lily white as my public school classrooms. The Unitarianism I grew up in was segregated not by law or by choice, but by custom and inertia. And it's only recently that this has changed. When I went back for my 40th High School Reunion in 2012, I was invited to preach at my home church, which is not the one I remember. Because after merging with an all black Pentecostal megachurch whose pastor converted

to Universalism (thank the Lord), All Souls today is a truly rainbow community with a praise band and a gospel choir and a membership as diverse as the city itself. Which gladdens me. It makes my spirit soar. I loved the church I grew up in, but I love this new church more. Because I truly believe this is the work churches should be doing, it's our mission, especially the mission of liberal churches like ours, building bridges between people, not barriers, not just proclaiming brotherhood and sisterhood, but actually restoring our fractured human family to wholeness and hugging. On the rare occasions when I worship in an assembly like that, filled with people of all colors and cultures and complexions, putting their arms around each other, singing harmony, I think to myself, "this is what peace looks like, this is what justice looks like," or if you believe in God, "this is the kind of world he or she intended us to live in." The kingdom of righteousness and shalom. Praise be!

But getting there remains a challenge. The roadmap that worked for Tulsa won't give us coordinates for creating the beloved community here in Taos, New Mexico. The pronouncements and anathemas emanating from Boston probably won't be of much use, either, because obviously we have a different history--a different set of circumstances--here. But that history may also be a blessing to us, despite the long tragic narratives of conquest and uprising and Kit Carson and the rest. Because in a nation that is rapidly becoming white minority, we are the one state where non-hispanic Euro-Americans have never been a majority. Where we are all minorities, like it or not. Where co-existence, live-and-let-live, the ethic of mutual respect, is the only viable alternative.

So what we are doing here is at the forefront, at the very center of learning to create a more tolerant and pluralistic world. Our efforts may seem small, like a mustard seed seems small. But the intercultural conversations initiative coming from Robert Silver and Chuck Doughty and Mary Gray and Barbara Scott is kingdom building work, in my opinion. The folks from our congregation who went last fall to the Jingle Dance at the Pueblo to support Standing Rock were doing advance preparation for the reign of glory. When our Board sent \$500 to rebuild black churches targeted by arson, we were building a pathway in the wilderness. Because deep in my heart, I do believe that one day we will join hands. That the more things change, the more light enters into dark places, the more hatred dissipates. That things don't always stay the same, or don't have to. Juneteenth is not ultimately a day to rage or mourn, or blame each other or call each other names, but an occasion to celebrate and renew our commitment to making General Orders No. 3 the law of the land, to making "absolute equality" the prayer of our collective soul.

