

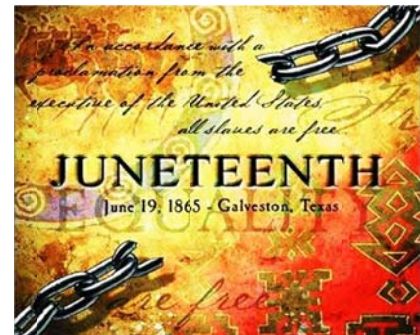
“Juneteenth”

Dr. D. Jay Losher

18 June 2017 + Gaithersburg Presbyterian Church
Matthew 9:35-38 + Matthew 10:5-8 = Anniversaries

Juneteenth. Ever celebrated it? It is a holiday which commemorates the ending of slavery in the US. Celebrated in thirty eight states and the District of Columbia, it is known as Emancipation Day or Freedom Day. The origin of the celebration dates to June 19th 1865 when General Gordon Granger announced the freeing of the slaves from the balcony of Ashton Villa in Galveston Texas.

There is something rather odd about a commemoration on the anniversary of June 19th 1865. It is a significant date alright, but there are more significant dates on the road to freedom for the slaves. Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22nd 1862, why not a commemoration of that date? Lincoln’s executive order had taken effect January 1st 1863 ~ that would seem another good date to remember.



When General Granger stepped out on that balcony, the Civil War itself had been over since April and Lincoln was dead and buried. The slaves had already been free two years, six months and nineteen days. What’s the big deal? Why is it this particular date has such significance above all others for Americans?

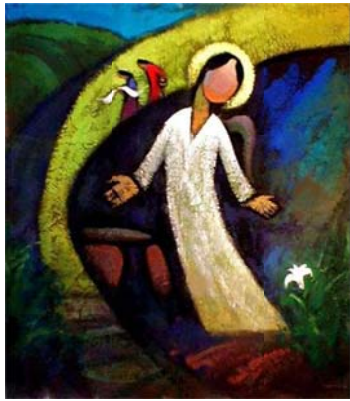
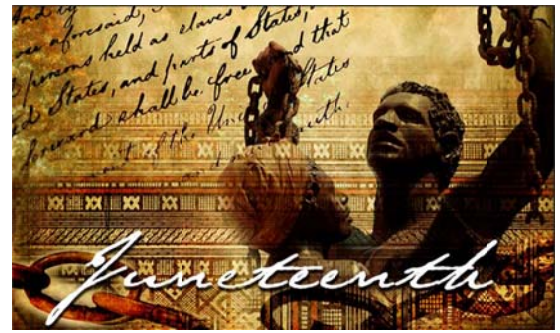
Ah, but this mystery is well explained by Jesus’ words:

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”



Jesus’ lament and then plea for laborers in God’s harvest is an appeal for disciples to step up, step forward and proclaim **“The kingdom of heaven has come near.”** ~ to carry that priceless Good News to all those who have

not yet had the opportunity to hear it. This news is of liberation from slavery to everything that binds us, everything that keeps us from our full humanity.



The victory was won long before. We in our ignorance have continued life as usual until we suddenly realize with jubilation we are free ~ we are already free ~ we have in fact been free all along. The action which freed us from slavery happened twenty centuries ago, “on a hill far away” at “the old rugged cross.”

Each of us continues to commemorate not only that day of victory, the day of resurrection so long ago, but we also commemorate the time we came out of our ignorance and realized it. Some of us can tell a moment, an exact day and time that the reveal hit us over the head. With some others of us, it is a process over an extended time when we became aware of God’s great love for us.

Tomorrow is June nineteenth and it is simply ripe with anniversaries. It represents the 152nd anniversary of the occasion now known as ‘Juneteenth,’ or Emancipation Day. Lou Gehrig, Moe Howard, Zoe Saldana, Paula Abdul and many others were born on the 19th of June.



‘Juneteenth’ also represents the 80th anniversary of the famous recording sessions of bluesman Robert Johnson in Dallas. Johnson is considered the father of rock and roll, whose songs have been covered by uncounted artists. Nevertheless, despite his success, he struggled with discouragement almost his entire life.

We also commemorate the 1 year and 1 week anniversary of the massacre of 49 LGBTQ friends and family in Orlando. And this last week in Alexandria we had a gunman shoot up a charity



baseball practice. A sitting congressman was severely wounded, and this is merely the 153rd mass shooting so far this year.



We do understand the lamentation; we know the discouragement and disappointment implicit in our culture of violence. We fathom the broken-heartedness, we know the desire to punch the sky and call down God's justice. We feel the grief deeply and we comprehend the fear.

Beyond the mountains of words expressed about the mass killings in Alexandria, in Charleston. in Orlando and Sandy Hook and San Bernardino and Boston and London and Paris ~ the insanity, the horror. Beyond everything else, we seek, we strain to hear, we hunger for a word from God which can only be heard when someone answers the call to spread the message of God's justice and peace, grace and love.

Yes, indeed, Jesus is right: **"the laborers are few."**

There was a point in my life, like so many others, when the LORD pressed on me this very verse, and I in fear and trembling answered Jesus' call, saying, "Here I am. Send me."



By no means the most significant, but one of these Juneteenth Anniversaries happens to be the anniversary of my ordination to the Gospel Ministry of Jesus Christ. Tomorrow represents 40 years of ordained service. Then again it was a bit of a miracle that the ordination came off at all.

Let me explain, in that day it was traditional to be ordained in the calling congregation, which would have been down South of Dallas in Milford and Italy. Due to it being impossible for my mother to travel, we asked for an exception so my ordination could take place at my home congregation way up in the Panhandle, First Presbyterian Church, Pampa, Texas. After some deliberation, eventually the Presbytery granted the request.



So here is the ordaining commission in Dallas, but the ordination is taking place more than 300 miles away in Pampa. How are they to get there ~ and on a Sunday afternoon? Well it turns out the Presbyterian pastor in Canadian nearby to Pampa, Smiley Johnson was a retired Air Force pilot. He generously offered to fly his private plane down to Ft. Worth, pick

up the commission and ferry them back and forth up to the Panhandle. It was an especially gracious offer given that he would be flying the distance four times in one day.

Two of the commission were unknown to me, but later became friends. One was then an elder, Elisha Pascal, a geologist with Phillips Petroleum, but who himself was wrestling with Jesus' call to become a laborer in God's field. He later completed Seminary and became a Minister of Word and Sacrament. Elisha Paschal, with a name like that, we all just knew he was predestined to become a Presbyterian Minister.

Another commissioner had an interesting backstory as well. The Reverend Wes Lackey, a former Southern Baptist pastor who saw the light and switched teams to become a Presbyterian Minister. He was reputed to be the best preacher in the Presbytery and he proved it very well that day. Add an elder each from the Milford and Italy churches, and the Reverend Smiley Johnson rounded out the commission.

Elder Elisha Paschal was selected clerk and his commission minutes start out: "called to order with prayer at 5,000 feet over Weatherford TX." And the rest as they say is history.

Jesus makes the plaintive lament, **"the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few"**

Then he sends out 12 volunteers but only within the margins of Israel. Then later he sends out 70, an increase of 600%, and this time not limited to Israel.¹ So the laborers are multiplying and the mission field expanding.



On down by all kinds of roundabout routes twenty centuries to:

- Elisha Pascal, a petroleum geologist, called by God
- Smiley Johnson, an Airforce pilot and instructor, called by God
- Wes Lackey, by a circuitous route first through the Baptists, but now a Presbyterian who would rather fight than switch, called by God
- Even to me, having a knock-down drag-out fight with God and God won.

Yet this is never the end of the story. The harvest is still plentiful and the laborers not enough. So the call is to you to be among the volunteers who spread the message of God's justice and peace, grace and love to hurting persons everywhere. To say when the LORD presses on you this call, that you respond with unwavering voice: "Here I am. Send me."



*Here I Am,
Send Me.*

¹ Luke 10:1-20