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“Where The Spirit Of The Lord Is, There Is Freedom”

Text: Psalm 78:1 - 11

Preached at KVCC

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Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

This statement is not from a gospel, but it is still good news. It's a phrase from one of Paul's letters to the congregation of Jesus-followers in Corinth. I share it with you this morning because this upcoming week contains a holiday, a holy day, called Juneteenth, which is all about spirit and freedom.

And I start my reflection this morning with a confession. Juneteenth is a holiday I had never heard of until literally about five years ago when I was in seminary. All of the fancy schools I had gone to never taught me about this holiday. All my family members who bragged about going to Harvard every time I saw them never mentioned this holiday. No diverse community I was ever a member of celebrated this holiday with either a parade, or a speech, or a special sale at the local car dealership. Juneteenth is a holiday that has been non-existent to me for most of my life. Perhaps it has been for you too. Perhaps there are even some here today that are hearing about Juneteenth for the first time.

I came to hear about Juneteenth from an African American classmate of mine who mentioned it as if everyone knew what this holiday was about, knew why it was a holy day. But I didn't. And as I've learned more about Juneteenth, and wondered about the events

it commemorates, I've been ever-more perplexed as to why I had never heard about this holiday until I was in my forties.

Now for some of us here today, we know all about Juneteenth, and what it commemorates. But for those of us who may not, Juneteenth is a holiday, a holy day, that marks the end of slavery for all the African American slaves that had been held in our nation.

Juneteenth, celebrated on June 19th throughout our nation, acknowledges the anniversary of when in 1865 Union General Gordon Granger read aloud General Order 3 to the people of Galveston Island in Texas. It proclaimed the emancipation of all slaves in that state. This was two years after Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which had granted freedom to all slaves in the United States. Because Texas was the final hold out for enforcing the Emancipation Proclamation, Juneteenth celebrates when all slaves were officially freed across our entire nation.

Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Juneteenth is a holiday, is a holy day, because it is a day when we remember and celebrate how we as citizens of this United States of America fought to make sure all of us could be free. The struggle for freedom for all – I can't think of any more holy an undertaking than this. The proclamation of freedom to the enslaved – are there any more sacred words than these? The rebuilding of a society based on the full equality of all – is there any work that is more inspired?

We may think of freedom as a mode of being created by certain kinds of political structures, or economic systems. But the apostle Paul reminds us that freedom is fundamentally a spiritual reality. It is the expression of the presence of God's spirit within our lives.

Yes, freedom for black slaves was a product of the Civil War, and of all of the sacrifices of those who gave their lives during the conflict.

Yes, the end of slavery was a product of the Emancipation Proclamation. But as Lincoln acknowledged at the end of his Proclamation it is also a manifestation of the gracious favor of God. Because God's dream for her children is freedom.

And isn't freedom for all something we should be celebrating fully and publically. Isn't celebrating the coming of freedom for all Americans something we should be teaching our children, in our families and in our schools? Isn't the ending of slavery in this nation something so sacred that we would want to remember it with joy across our nation?

Other nations have commemorated the end of slavery in their countries. Other peoples have solemnized the emancipation of slaves through the creation of their own holy days.

Think of our Jewish brothers and sisters. They celebrate the Passover. They celebrate the holiness of their ancestors being brought out of slavery in Egypt with a celebration, and the sharing of food and story. And they remember how this event was not simply a political power struggle between Moses and Pharaoh. They remember how the coming to their freedom was filled with God's spirit and presence. Passover for the Jews is the very expression of Paul's insight that where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Passover for the Jews is a holiday; it is a holy day, which is celebrated year after year so that the entire community can remember the great work of God in the world, and pass this knowledge on to their children.

As the Psalmist says:

...He commanded our ancestors to teach...their children; that the next generation might know....so that they would set their hope on God, and not forget the works of God.”

The celebration of Juneteenth responds to this commandment of God in that it is our nation’s moment to tell once again the story of emancipation, and freedom. It is the time to teach our children what has happened right here, right in our own nation. It is the time to remember the great works of God not just long ago and far away, but right in the core of what it means to be the people, the black and white and brown people, of this United States of America.

But the hangover of slavery, and the spirit of inequality and racism that spawned it, still lives and breathes and is given a place to settle in our national heart. I wonder if this is at least part of the reason I had never heard of Juneteenth until I was in my forties. I wonder if the spirit of racism has helped to relegate Juneteenth to the status of

a secondary or tertiary holiday in our nation because some of us may think of it as a holiday for them, for blacks, instead of a holy day for all of us, for all who call themselves Americans.

When I was looking for images of Juneteenth to add to the bulletin I kept finding images of African Americans in parades, of black Americans giving speeches, and in only a few of the images that Google returned to me did these events also contain white Americans. Based on my own experience of never having heard of Juneteenth until I was in my forties, of being told about it for the first time from a African American classmate, of seeing images on the web with mostly African Americans celebrating Juneteenth perhaps Juneteenth is a holiday, a holy day, not for all Americans, but mostly just for African Americans. Perhaps God did her great work of liberation only for blacks.

Or perhaps she did something even greater. Perhaps God did something that touched not just black Americans, but something that touched us all.

I think Juneteenth is something white America should be teaching our children, I think Juneteenth is something white America should be celebrating by showing up to parades and speeches and special sales at local car dealerships, because Juneteenth also remembers how God worked to transform and reform the heart of white America so that many of our ancestors struggled and died for the freedom of our black brothers and sisters. Juneteenth celebrates that internal liberation of white America, which allowed our ancestors to give up their privilege for the sake of a greater equality and humanity across our land. Juneteenth marks the physical end of slavery, yes, but it also acknowledges the spiritual revolution that allowed for a radical reimagining of our whole society.

You see God's spirit came to redeem us all, in all of the ways we had been enslaved.

Last week we celebrated Pentecost here in this sanctuary. We told the story again of how God's spirit is given to each one of us as children of God. And we marked our foreheads with gold dust as a symbol of this truth in our own lives. What must people at the farmer's market have thought when they saw all of us show up covered in gold?

But this gift of spirit is also a taking on of responsibility.

If we are to be the vessels of God's spirit in this world then we must also be the apostles, or ambassadors of freedom in our land.

Juneteenth marks the end of slavery in America, and is truly a holy day. But the hangover of racism remains. Full freedom still eludes the lives of many of our black neighbors. Full freedom still eludes

the hearts of many of our white neighbors. Perhaps full freedom even eludes some of the depths of our own hearts. But God is calling us to enter these places that are not yet fully free and bring the spirit she has given us to do her great work of love. She is calling us to bring nothing less than freedom to those who are still bound.

Because where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Happy Juneteenth!

Amen.