

AColyte

June 19, 2020

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College



Official Juneteenth 140th Anniversary Yard sign from 2005

From <https://www.juneteenth.com/history.htm>

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Sherman, Texas
June 19, 2020

*"[Juneteenth] is actually an important event,
an important time.
But nobody had ever heard of it."
--A prominent American
quoted in the Wall Street Journal
June 18, 2020*

“Nobody had ever heard of it”?

I had heard of Juneteenth before this week.

Despite claims to the contrary, I heard about Juneteenth in my home, at my church, and in integrated public schools in Ft. Worth, Texas in the 1970s.

My children learned about Juneteenth as well--in our home, at our church and in public schools in Sherman, Texas.

Don't get me wrong, it's definitely a good thing that others in our society are also learning and recognizing that Juneteenth is “an important event, an important time.”

Welcome to the party.

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Here's a quick summary of the Juneteenth story:

On June 19, 1865, Major General Gordon Granger of the United States Army landed at Galveston bearing the news of the end of the Civil War (Lee had surrendered to Grant the previous April).

On the steps of this home in Galveston, Granger read General Order Number 3 beginning with these words:



*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 rights
and rights of property between former masters and slaves,
and the connection heretofore existing between them
becomes that between employer and free laborer.*

The Emancipation Proclamation had technically gone into effect on January 1, 1863, but it had not been publicly read, much less enforced, in Texas until Major General Granger arrived with Federal troops in June 1865.

According to the excellent website Juneteenth World Wide Celebrations:

*The **reactions to this profound news** ranged
from pure **shock** to immediate **jubilation**.*

*While many lingered to learn of this new
employer to employee relationship,
many left before these offers
were completely off the lips of their former 'masters' –
attesting to the varying conditions on the plantations
and the realization of freedom.*

***Even with nowhere to go,**
many felt that leaving the plantation
would be their first grasp of freedom.*

*North was a logical destination
and for many it represented true freedom,
while the **desire to reach family members in neighboring states**
drove some into Louisiana, Arkansas and Oklahoma.*

*Settling into these new areas as free men and women
brought on new realities and
**the challenges of establishing a heretofore non-existent status
for black people in America.***

*Recounting the memories of that great day in June of 1865
and its festivities would serve as motivation
as well as a release from the growing pressures
encountered in their new territories.*

*The celebration of **June 19th was coined "Juneteenth"**
and grew with more participation from descendants.*

***The Juneteenth celebration was a time for reassuring each other,
for praying and for gathering remaining family members.***

*Juneteenth continued to be highly revered in Texas decades later,
with many former slaves and descendants
making an **annual pilgrimage back to Galveston** on this date.*

There's more good information on the Juneteenth.com website. I encourage you to check it out if you're interested.

<https://www.juneteenth.com/history.htm>

Juneteenth became an official Texas State Holiday in 1980.

Legislation sponsored by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee that would make Juneteenth a national holiday is currently being considered in Congress.

Juneteenth is a big deal. All Texans, and Texas residents – really all Americans – should know about it, mark it, and celebrate it.

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As I've thought about Juneteenth this week my mind keeps returning to three passages from the Bible.

Teach your children well.
--Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young

Deuteronomy 6:20-25 says

- ²⁰ When your children ask you in time to come,
"What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes
and the ordinances
that the Lord our God has commanded you?"
²¹ then you shall say to your children,
"We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt,
but the Lord brought us out of Egypt
with a mighty hand.
²² The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs
and wonders against Egypt,
against Pharaoh and all his household.
²³ He brought us out from there in order to bring us in,
to give us the land
that he promised on oath to our ancestors.
²⁴ Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes,
to fear the Lord our God,
for our lasting good,*

*so as to keep us alive,
as is now the case.
25 If we diligently observe this entire commandment
before the Lord our God,
as he has commanded us,
we will be in the right.”*

That's a call to a particular faith community to be diligent about telling its story to future generations.

When our children, or our neighbors, or our colleagues ask us about the meaning of Juneteenth, we need to be prepared to answer.

And we need to tell the truth.

We need to tell the truth about the gruesome, barbaric, inhumane system in which, for 246 years white people owned, abused, mistreated, disregarded, maimed, murdered, used, and devalued black people;

We need to tell the truth about the incredible resilience, courage, and faith of enslaved persons who both endured and resisted the pervasive and fundamental evil that was human slavery in general and American slavery in particular;

We need to know and tell the truth about people of all races who devoted their lives to arguing, pleading, praying, and fighting for the abolition of slavery; and

We need to recognize and acknowledge the real and legitimate joy to which the news of the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of enslaved persons, gave rise.

And we need to know and tell the parts of our common story about ways that institutional, systemic, government-supported racism has remained part of American life in the 155 years since slavery was abolished.

We need to know and tell the whole story.

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*When Israel was in Egypt's land, let my people go.
Oppressed so hard they could not stand, let my people go.
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land.
Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.*

*...We need always weep and mourn
While some wear slav'ry chains forlorn
Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt's land.
Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.
--"Go Down Moses,"
traditional*

Chapters 7-12 of the Book of Exodus tell the story of the ways in which God works through Moses and through ten plagues to accomplish the release of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

At the end of that story, in Exodus 12:14, God tells Moses:

*This day shall be a day of remembrance for you.
You shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord;
throughout your generations
you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance.*

Within Judaism, the call in this verse and others in the book of Exodus to "observe" that "day of remembrance" as a "perpetual ordinance" has led to the development of the tradition of the Passover Seder.

A Passover Seder is a community ritual commemorating the events described in the biblical book of Exodus.

It is likely that the Christian "Last Supper" described in the Gospels was a Seder Dinner.

Before the coming of the Coronavirus we had planned to hold a Passover Seder Dinner at Austin College (as we have done for many years). We—leaders of the Jewish Students Association, Majors Interns, and I—had most of the service written.

Early in the Seder service, a leader was to say the following:

*We gather here to remember that we were once slaves,
and now we are free.
Freedom is a sacred gift,
and it is our obligation to keep this memory alive and to cherish it.
We celebrate our struggle for the precious gift of freedom.
And though this is a sacred celebration,*

*we must keep close to our minds and hearts
all those who are not free,
all those who suffer.*

**“We must keep close to our minds and hearts all those who are not free,
all those who suffer.”**

The recent deaths of African-Americans **Rayshard Brooks, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor** and too many more of our fellow citizens have given rise to widespread expressions of grief, rage, and protest throughout our country.

While almost nobody consciously and openly advocates police brutality or the killing of innocent people, many Americans are threatened or disturbed by some of those protests and demands, some of those expressions of rage and grief.

I think the Seder service, and – by extension – the Bible calls us to lean into that discomfort.

We ought to be uncomfortable with the current state of affairs in our country.

We ought to be uncomfortable that black Americans face obstacles, threats, and dangers that are not faced by other Americans.

At this moment in our life together “keep[ing] close to our minds and hearts all those who are not free, all those who suffer” means listening, learning, and paying attention.

It means moving toward our discomfort, not away from it.

Just as Deuteronomy 26 calls us all to remember and tell the whole truth, the whole story, Exodus 12:14 and the Seder tradition to which it gives rise calls us all to “keep close to our minds and hearts all those who are not free, all those who suffer.”

We don’t have permission to ignore our neighbors who are having a hard time.

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And there’s an obscure story in the 15th Chapter of the Book of Acts that also feels relevant in this moment in our life together.

It’s a little complicated. Bear with me.

Spoiler alert: I think the following story is important and relevant because:

- it is a story about a community of people who have different experiences and opinions about who belongs – about who deserves a place at the table;
- it is a story in which different people with different experiences, perspectives, and opinions gather together, talk to each other and listen to each other and some of them change their minds;
- it is a story in which the participants recognize the presence and leadership of the Holy Spirit in their conversations and decisions.

Bear with me. Don't let yourself get lost in the weeds of the particulars of circumcision.

I think it will be worth it.

*1 Then certain individuals came down from Judea
and were teaching the brothers,
"Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses,
you cannot be saved."*

There were lots of people in the early Church who thought that Christianity was essentially a new form of Judaism.

They believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament Messianic prophecies, and they couldn't make any sense of their Christian faith apart from their Jewish faith.

And that faith tradition said very clearly throughout Genesis and Exodus that people had to be circumcised before they could join the faith community.

*2 And after Paul and Barnabas had
no small dissension and debate with them,
Paul and Barnabas and some of the others
were appointed to go up to Jerusalem
to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.*

Paul and Barnabas had been preaching about Jesus among Gentiles – non-Jews.

They had not been talking to them about circumcision at all.

And the results of their preaching and evangelism were incredible. Gentile churches were growing like crazy.

So there were these “certain individuals” telling all these new Christians that they all had to be circumcised, while Paul and Barnabas were saying, “No – that circumcision stuff doesn’t matter any more.”

So the Church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to the Church in Jerusalem to see how they were dealing with the circumcision issue.

They sought a conversation. Mark that.

3 *So they were sent on their way by the church,
and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria,
they reported the conversion of the Gentiles,
and brought great joy to all the believers. ^a*

Paul and Barnabas were telling their stories about the conversion of Gentiles to Christianity and everyone was getting really fired up.

4 *When they came to Jerusalem,
they were welcomed by the church
and the apostles and the elders,
and they reported all that God had done with them.*

5 *But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees
stood up and said,
"It is necessary for them to be circumcised
and ordered to keep the law of Moses."*

Same disagreement.

Some folks were happy with the status quo and reluctant to move beyond that.

Their old, biblically-based categories had been working fine all these years and they saw no reason to change them.

6 *The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter.*

As the leaders of the early Church faced dissension and disagreement, they didn't wait for some charismatic, extra-holy leader to tell them what they were supposed to do. They didn't look for anybody else to give them instructions that would let them avoid difficult conversations.

They got together and talked about it.

*7 After there had been much debate,
Peter stood up and said to them,
"My brothers, ^b you know that in the early days
God made a choice among you,
that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles
would hear the message of the good news and become believers.*

*8 And God, who knows the human heart,
testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit,
just as he did to us;*

*9 and in cleansing their hearts by faith
he has made no distinction between them and us.*

In Acts 10, Peter has a dream in which God tells him to go preach the Gospel to a Roman centurion named Cornelius.

Peter resisted at first because, as a good Jew, he thought Gentiles were unclean and he couldn't believe that the Jesus message was meant for them.

But God told him, "What I have called clean, you must not call unclean."
Cornelius was clearly not a Jew, clearly not circumcised, but when Peter told to him and his family about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, they became Christians, were baptized, and received the gift of the Holy Spirit. It was like a mini-Pentecost among non-Jews.

That's what Peter's talking about here in verses 7-9.

*10 Now therefore why are you putting God to the test
by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke
that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?*

Why are you telling these Gentile converts that they have to follow all of the Hebrew law?

We know that not even good former Jews like us can follow all the requirements of God's law.

*11 On the contrary,
we believe that we will be saved
through the grace of the Lord Jesus,
just as they will."*

Remember? That's why we've all become Christians.

Because we all understand God's Law in new ways because of Jesus. He's the Messiah; the one who fulfilled the Law for us.

*12 The whole assembly kept silence,
and listened to Barnabas and Paul
as they told of all the signs and wonders
that God had done through them among the Gentiles.*

"Kept silence."

"Listened."

How radical does that sound?

Paul and Barnabas had their own stories about preaching the Gospel to uncircumcised Gentiles and watching them respond in the same way that Jewish Christians had responded.

Peter and Paul and Barnabas told similar, and surprising stories in that council of apostles and elders.

And then an extraordinary thing happens in verse 13.

After they had finished speaking,

That is, Barnabas, Paul, and Peter,

*After they had finished speaking,
James replied, "My brothers, listen to me.
Simeon has related
how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles,
to take from among them a people for his name.
This agrees with the words of the prophets.*

When James mentions "Simeon," he's referring to Peter's story about the conversion of Cornelius and his family.

This agrees with the words of the prophets,

And then—in Acts 15:16-18, James quotes Amos 9:11-12:

*"[I will set up the house of David]
so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called..."*

Now we have to stop her for a quick aside:

If you look Amos 9:11-12 in your Bible, you won't find those words.

James' Bible had been translated from a different Hebrew text than the one we use now. But James was quoting accurately from his Bible.

So after hearing Barnabas, Paul, and Peter talk about the conversion of Gentiles, James uses a different biblical text to interpret their stories. He's still talking about the Bible—about texts that everybody at the Council would have recognized as sacred.

19 *Therefore I have reached the decision
that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God,
20 but we should write to them
to abstain only from things polluted by idols
and from fornication
and from whatever has been strangled ^e and from blood.
21 For in every city, for generations past,
Moses has had those who proclaim him,
for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues."*

James was the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem Church. His status as a sort of “elder statesman” in the early church means that his word carried great weight in the council.

So it’s a really big deal when James comes down squarely in favor of including uncircumcised Gentiles in the Church.

He changed his mind. He learned something that he had not recognized before.

22 *Then the apostles and the elders,
with the consent of the whole church,
decided to choose men from among their members^f
and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.
They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas,
leaders among the brothers,
23 with the following letter:*

We’ll get to the letter in a second, but first we need to note that, after all the conversations and debates and amazing stories, and with the clear leadership of James, the Jerusalem Council made some decisions.

They took some action. They didn’t just talk – they *did* something.

They decided that people didn’t have to be circumcised before they could be part of the Church;

And they decided to send Paul, Barnabas, Silas, and Judas Barsabbas with a letter to tell churches what had happened at the Council.

Here’s what the letter said:

*"The brothers, both the apostles and the elders,
to the believers^g of Gentile origin
in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia,
greetings.*

24 *Since we have heard that certain persons
who have gone out from us,
though with no instructions from us,
have said things to disturb you
and have unsettled your minds,*

That all Christians have to be circumcised.

[h](#)

25 *we have decided unanimously to choose representatives ⁱ
and send them to you,
along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,
26* *who have risked their lives
for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.
27* *We have therefore sent Judas and Silas,
who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.*

That is, "We trust and endorse these guys who are bringing this letter to you."

28 *For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us*

The authors of the letter believed that their discussions, deliberations, and decisions had been guided by the Holy Spirit.

28 *For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us
to impose on you no further burden than these essentials:
29* *that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols
and from blood
and from what is strangled ⁱ
and from fornication.
If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."*

Circumcision is never mentioned in the letter.

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*Maybe it's just news on your television
Or it might be God trying to get your attention.
--Keb' Mo'*

Let's look back at the first part of verse 28:

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.

I think that verse is huge because it suggests that the participants in the Jerusalem Council thought God was present in their entire conversation.

There was no single scripture verse that somebody quoted that shut down and ended the conversation.

People told their own stories.

People listened to each other.

Some people listened and then *change their minds*.

Here's why I think that matters for us:

In his June 9 letter to the entire Austin College community, President O'Day said:

I have charged the President's Committee on Inclusion and Diversity to gather ideas from all members of the Austin College community on actionable steps to help to make justice and opportunity a reality for all – here and everywhere.

The bi-weekly “[at]AC Bi-Weekly Newsletter” that was emailed to all Austin College students, faculty, staff, and alumni on June 19 includes a link to a survey form to share those actionable steps with the President's Committee on Inclusion and Diversity.

Those completed forms will make important contributions to our ongoing efforts to “make justice and opportunity a reality for all” at Austin College.

Because I am a Bible geek (and a Presbyterian one at that), I believe the Holy Spirit will be present throughout those conversations.

I believe we will do better work together than any of us could do by ourselves.

And I believe Juneteenth was the perfect day to send out the survey and begin our conversations.

We've got work to do.

We need to follow the lead of Deuteronomy 26 and tell our individual stories and our common story.

We need to follow the lead of the Seder and “keep close to our minds and hearts all those who are not free, all those who suffer.”

And we need to follow the lead of the Jerusalem Council by listening to each other (especially those whose perspectives and experiences differ from ours).

We need to talk to each other.

We need to move forward together.

I believe that engaging in those conversations together will be the best way for us all to get from where we are to where we need to be;
where we can be;
where we should be.

Until next time, I remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Contemplating Having a Strawberry Soda with my Dinner*,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

***Certain foods became popular** and subsequently synonymous with Juneteenth celebrations such as **strawberry soda-pop**. (Juneteenth.org)