

Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church
“Juneteenth”
June 19, 2022

Rev. Ann Kadlecek & Carol Carter Walker

Readings and Reflections

CHALICE LIGHTING “We Rose” by Kristina Kay Robinson¹

STORY *Opal Lee and What it Means to be Free* by Alice Faye Duncan²

READING The Emancipation Proclamation (abridged)

... [O]n the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act ... to repress such persons, ... in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom. ...

Now, therefore I, Abraham Lincoln, ... do, ... order and designate as the States and parts of States wherein the people thereof ... are this day in rebellion the following, ...:

Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, (except the Parishes of St. Bernard, Plaquemines, Jefferson, St. John, St. Charles, St. James Ascension, Assumption, Terrebonne, Lafourche, St. Mary, St. Martin, and Orleans, including the City of New Orleans) Mississippi, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia, (except the forty-eight counties designated as West Virginia, and also the counties of Berkley, Accomac, Northampton, Elizabeth City, York, Princess Ann, and Norfolk, including the cities of Norfolk and Portsmouth), and which excepted parts, are for the present, left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued. ...

And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defense; and I recommend to them that, in all cases when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages.

And I further declare and make known, that such persons of suitable condition, will be received into the armed service of the United States

And upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God.

¹ Kristina Kay Robinson, “We Rose,” various internet sources, including:
<https://medium.com/@earthforwardgrp/juneteenth-2022-fa92e40420a9>.

² Alice Faye Duncan, video used with permission: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vi_mia6H3kA.

FIRST REFLECTION Rev. Ann Kadlecek

President Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves with the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863. The benevolent, just white man bestowing freedom and equality on enslaved people with the stroke of a pen.

That's what I learned growing up. There's a pretty good chance you did, too. Reality was a little different. Starting with that proclamation...

For one thing, the statement "all persons held as slaves shall be free" was punitive, not visionary - it only applied to the states currently "in rebellion" – not to the five states (one of which was Maryland) where slavery was legal, but they were not currently in rebellion. And not to the long list of "exceptions" that I just read. Enslaved people in those places were indeed "left precisely as if this proclamation were not issued."

It was punitive – and it was expedient. Its purpose was revealed in its reference to military necessity, and its explicit invitation to newly freed people to join the military. Black soldiers were desperately needed.

So not quite a perfect expression of the values of justice and equality. But perhaps a step in that direction.

A step that by itself, was just words – meaningless unless there are people who make those words real. In this case, by military victory.

And a piece of history that I never learned in school was the role of African American soldiers in that victory. 200,000 formerly enslaved Black men fought in that war. 40,000 of them died.³ Without them, said Abraham Lincoln, "the war against the south could not have been won."⁴ Hari Jones, assistant director and curator of the African American Civil War Museum in DC, who died earlier this year, put it this way:

The emancipation proclamation was important because it made it legal for formerly enslaved Americans to save the union and free themselves.⁵

It was both deeply flawed, and something to celebrate.

And then, the 13th amendment formally abolished slavery and enshrined Black freedom in the constitution. At least that's how I learned it. Reality was a little murkier. It did end slavery, with these words:

"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

"Except as punishment for a crime" is a loophole big enough to drive a whole lot of oppression and injustice through. Laws were passed that targeted Black people, law enforcement systems

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_history_of_African_Americans_in_the_American_Civil_War

⁴ <https://www.doi.gov/blog/defining-moments-and-historic-places-civil-war>

⁵ Hari Jones, lecture, "Why Celebrate Juneteenth? As a matter of Conscious..." (2011)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7__GJJuFOM

were created to enforce those laws and to selectively enforce objectively neutral laws, the prison system disproportionately incarcerated Black people

All designed to allow those with more societal privilege to continue to control the bodies - and exploit the labor – of a particular group of those with less.

Nowhere in these revered documents or elsewhere in our history did we as a country commit to ending anti-Black violence, and creating freedom for all.

The struggle for freedom goes on.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE “*Grief*” by William Grant Still, sung by Elizabeth Porter

The struggle for freedom goes on. And yet, Juneteenth is a big deal. It celebrates the moment when, as the story goes, on June 19, 1865, Union general Gordon Granger stood on a balcony in Galveston Texas and announced “All slaves are free.” Even knowing the context and subsequent history, those are powerful words.

And, even the most powerful words are just words until people make them real. Noncompliant enslavers were everywhere, and those who on paper were now free were often forcibly returned or killed if they tried to leave. And the formerly enslaved quickly realized that the end of legal slavery was not the same as freedom.

But still, the progress and the promise of those words was cause to rejoice. And, wonderful Juneteenth celebrations quickly emerged in homes, churches, city streets and parks - often with parades, music and feasts that befit an emancipation day.⁶

Big celebrations soon became too dangerous, though; for generations, the day was more often marked in smaller, more private settings, if at all. It wasn’t until 1980 that Juneteenth first became a state holiday. And now, it’s a federal holiday.

A celebration of freedom (actual and aspirational) – and, perhaps, a call to reflection: on the winding path toward justice, where are we? Which way are we going?

And, how is Black freedom? How real have we been able to make those words? What can we do? And, in this majority white congregation, what is the role of white people in the struggle for Black freedom?

To get at some of these questions, I find I need to center white experience briefly, and I ask your indulgence.

For those of us who are white - Juneteenth is not yet our celebration. But it is an opportunity to learn, reflect and act.

In my reflection and conversations lately, I’ve been noticing barriers to white participation in the struggle for Black freedom that are rooted in the kind of freedom that the dominant culture offers - the freedom to do whatever we want, regardless of the consequences to others. It’s the

⁶ Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (Little, Brown & Company, 2021) 187.

freedom to take off a mask, carry an assault rifle, desecrate the environment, dominate and exploit people outside our group. This, we're told, is freedom.

That's not freedom. That's power, and privilege. When our Principles speak of freedom, they mean something very different – more like the freedom to live with integrity, to do the work of engaging with life as our most authentic and best selves, free from harm, treated with respect, in community, with love.

Our culture tries to confuse privilege with freedom. But they're not the same. And we are not free.

We're all stuck in the same system that oppresses and dehumanizes. White nonfreedom is quite different from Black nonfreedom. White folks are much less likely to be harassed or killed by law enforcement or radicalized white people (while jogging or grocery shopping or sleeping in our own beds, for example), and as a group, those of us who are white have much greater access to many forms of security and comfort.

And I'm always a little uneasy about encouraging white people to focus on our struggles – we do that enough as it is, and I don't want to lose sight of the fact that the systems of oppression we're talking about are intentionally designed to control, dominate and exploit people of color.

But, the privilege of being white in this country comes with a cost that is nothing less than our full humanity. Through our participation in systems of oppression (whether or not we approve of them), we lose a piece of our truest selves. And without that, we are not free, and (returning to today's theme) we're not very useful in the struggle for Black freedom.

The privilege that is bestowed on white people in this country comes with a world view rooted in hierarchy and domination, populated by winners and losers (and we want to be winners!), and the lie that we are separate, disconnected, unaffected by someone else's suffering. We know that's not true – a recognition of our deep interdependence is at the heart of Unitarian Universalism. And if enough of us who are white truly behaved as though our freedom was bound up with the freedom of our Black siblings, systems of oppression could not stand. So ... those systems make it very hard to act on what we know to be true.

And that inaction has a cost. It's a kind of moral injury – the toll it takes on those of us who are white to participate in a system that benefits us and violates our deeply held values. This disconnect between the values we hold dear, and the actual impact of our lives is hard to live with. And so, many of us find ourselves in denial, disengaged, clinging to myth, or behaving in ways that make us feel less complicit, but – in the struggle for Black freedom - aren't all that helpful.

And we remain stuck - unable to open our hearts to the kind of change that might actually make us all more free.

Fortunately, we have a religious community – heart opening is kind of our thing. At its best, this congregation can push us, and hold us, as we open ourselves to learn and grow and change. This is what our 8th Principle work is about. The Widening the Circle groups, the Diversity and Antiracism Transformation Team, and the Racial Climate Coalition. Heart-opening work

is underway – and this, along with the diversity that is already present in this congregation, is a gift we bring to the struggle for Black freedom. And it will be a greater gift when more of us are involved. If you're white, and have been thinking this is someone else's work, I invite you to reconsider. This work is how we become more free. There is no "us" helping "them." This is working together to free us all. We need each other to break free.

Perhaps, on this Juneteenth, those of us who are white might be called – not to try to give freedom to someone else, but to join with People of Color to free ourselves in the pursuit of freedom for us all.

SECOND REFLECTION

Carol Carter Walker

I was born in Washington, DC, and attended its segregated schools until I went to a New England boarding school in the 10th grade.

I don't remember any mention of Juneteenth, growing up, either at home or at school. My experience of black history, or rather Negro history, as it was then called, was confined to one week in February, where, at least in the black schools, there was intense study and bulletin board displays of notable Negro men and women. At any other time, there was no attention paid to the history of my people. The slavery story was very much condensed, moving from tales of black folk being brought in chains from Africa, and skipping almost four hundred years, to the story of the Civil War being fought over slavery, and the white hero, Abraham Lincoln, freeing us, via the winning of the War, and the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation.

The elementary and secondary schools I attended in Washington were among the top two black schools in the city, so if Juneteenth wasn't mentioned there, it wasn't taught anywhere in the city. I surveyed my sister, my daughter, my grandchildren and my niece. All attended schools in the District, Maryland, or Virginia. My daughter remembers mention of Juneteenth in a required high school class on DC, not American History. My niece remembers no mention at all in her Montgomery County Schools. My granddaughter Lisa said that she first heard mention of Juneteenth when she took Reckoning With Race, a class for her African American Studies at the University of Virginia. All of the others had the same experience as I did. Never heard of the event.

Maybe we would have known about Juneteenth had my folks had Texas rather than Georgia roots.

The Emancipation Proclamation **was** taught, even celebrated-- but only from a white perspective. The heroic bravery of Lincoln, the upholding of the founding statements in the Declaration of Independence—that all men were created equal. There was no mention of the slave-like status of the newly-freed men, women, and children who were forced off the lands they had tilled, or were kept as slaves defying the Proclamation, and others taking only a half-step up to sharecropper status. Some slaves who were skilled craftsmen, were able to provide for their families by working as blacksmiths, loggers, dock workers, collecting the wages

themselves, rather than being hired out by their former owners and usually seeing none of that money that white families made from their labor.

I am 80. All through my life, slavery was glossed over and minimized. The Emancipation Proclamation, whether issued by Lincoln in 1863, to slaves in the Confederacy, or in 1865, when Major General Gordon Granger read the proclamation in Galveston, Texas, centered white folks as heroes. The unpleasantries of chattel slavery which legally existed north and south for 400 years, were not discussed, and only recently, have begun to be seen as worthy of broad academic attention.

I like to work with Rev. Ann as a Worship Associate, and in other venues. She is so organized, timely, and methodical in her approach and preparation. I volunteered for this Service before knowing the topic, hoping some of her traits would rub off on me. We talked about every element of this Service several times, beginning last October. Each time I we talked, I found myself becoming paralyzingly angry. If I were to title my reflection, it would be: Juneteenth: Still Waiting On My Emancipation.

To me, the Emancipation Proclamation is a document designed to make white people of some moral fiber feel better about themselves. Most framers of our national documents ‘knew’ that it cuts against their religious and political values to legally declare that slavery was ‘right’ because black folks were inferior—hence the Proclamation. So, it was OK to legally get rid of chattel slavery, but not its byproducts or legacy.

The fact that black people have been able to survive, even thrive in this country—is a credit to us—not anyone else. The Paint Branch Diversity/Antiracism Transformation Team has spent the past year and a half reading about the lives of black folks in America, from the perspective of black women and men authors. The books portray the resilience and persistence that we have had to have in the face of belief, supported by law, custom, and violence, that we are inferior. In these books, it’s shown how some of us excelled (credit to our race, don’t ya know) or stumbled (lawbreakers), or just put one foot before the other day-to-day, to make a way out of no way.

What if, the Emancipation Proclamation had acknowledged the generational harm done for 400 years and developed programs to educate and reparate by providing the necessities of life. It’s ironic, that our divorce laws often provide a long-term benefit for ex-spouses in terms of alimony, child support, required division of assets. Yes, there was the Freedmen’s Bureau, set up at the very end of the Civil War, under the military arm of government, to do something like this, but it was underfunded and understaffed.

Why did we not build a federally-supported school system to educate the generations of folks who risked death for learning how to read? Why did it take us more than 100 years to pass a federal anti-lynching law in 2021? Why do we allow the police to kill black and brown and other marginalized people with impunity, with a few exceptions? Why do recent studies show that doctors believe that blacks can withstand more pain than whites—and treat them accordingly? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why? Why?

Had I continued to wait to receive the full benefits of citizenship that the Emancipation Proclamation implies, I could easily be a sharecropper living in a house I didn't own, with no indoor plumbing or a low-level federal employee, even with a college degree.

What can I be authentically hopeful about? I am 80. I will not live to be fully emancipated—but I think my grandchildren might do so. They will be able to fulfill the words of the Chalice Lighting, 'Dream we will, Act We Must.' To bring it home, what can I be hopeful about here at Paint Branch? First, we need to know our true history as a country, as a faith tradition, and as a congregation. Then, I believe that we can have constructive conversations across racial lines to break down the barriers that separate us. When we talk together, we are able to come out from behind the scrim of the stereotypes and see our common humanities. This can happen. I've seen it in the Bookread group, during the Widening The Circle workshops, and in other gatherings. Sometimes the words and feelings flow freely. Sometimes the conversation is stunted. But as we exercise our truth-telling and heart-opening muscles, the walls between us do indeed come tumbling down. As musician Joyce Poley wrote, "And when we see our faces in each other's eyes, then our heart is in a holy place."⁷

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CHALICE EXTINGUISHING The last stanza of "Fury and Faith" by Amanda Gorman⁸

⁷ *Singing the Journey* (Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005) Hymn #1008, *When Our Heart is in a Holy Place*.

⁸ *E.g.*, Amanda Gorman Reads Her Poem "Fury and Faith," Bach Virtuosi Festival (2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9Tco9MiLVc>.