

## *Juneteenth*

It was probably 8 years ago now when I learned about Juneteenth. I learned about it from Miss Bobbi Thompson. She said she was having a Juneteenth concert with her choir here in our sanctuary. Now, if I'm being honest, I thought I heard June 19<sup>th</sup> but now I know that I didn't. And I knew that I had to go home and learn all I could about a part of history I was never taught.

In 1865, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation, there were still slaves in Galveston, Texas who had not heard about their freedom. A group of Union troops came to deliver the news and the last slaves were finally freed. This under-noticed occasion should be celebrated as a holy day in American history, and now it is a national holiday.

It's important to debunk any romanticized notion that after they got the news, the newly freed slaves all dropped their tools and started partying in the middle of the field. History shows that the response after June 19, 1865, indicate a decidedly mixed reaction from the newly freed Galvestonians. This is not hard to imagine. Have you ever received overwhelming news before? Some were overjoyed, others frightened at what this freedom meant for their new life. And many, many, many people simply went back to work. Even though they weren't in bondage, the continued to work and live like slaves. They chose captivity because they saw no other options. But they were free.

In the words of Dr. Daina Ramsey Berry, professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin, Juneteenth, "means celebrating African American freedom and acknowledging African American restraints that have been put upon us as people. She says, It is a moment where we celebrate gains and losses. We are seeing African Americans today being beaten the same way we did in the 1990s, the same way we did in the 1960s and in the 1860s. We are seeing African American life being devaluated by not only police officers but also citizens who feel they have the right to challenge and confront Americans for doing every day, mundane tasks like bird watching in a park. African Americans are being killed in their living rooms, they're being killed in their backyards, they're being killed on the streets and they're being killed sleeping in their cars, they're being killed for purchasing some skittles and for playing with a toy gun.

I think about my grandfather, Maynard Hardt, who lived next door to me. He went to Ferris State University and became a pharmacist. He owned his own business and taught my father about hard work. But I know that if my grandfather had been African American, he would not have been able to receive the education he got. It would have been nearly impossible for him to get the funding to own his own store, to move freely around the city of Detroit without harassment or discrimination. Because he was white, he didn't have to contend with the racism built into the systems of education, banking, health care, law enforcement, home ownership and more.

That is white privilege. It doesn't mean that he didn't work hard. It doesn't mean that he didn't deserve the fruits of his labors. It does mean that the deck was stacked in his favor and through the generations – in my favor.

I am the beneficiary of generations of white privilege and the ways in which the deck was repeatedly stacked in the benefit of my white ancestors.

And because racism continues to persist – systemically – in nearly every institution in our country, I continue to benefit from white privilege. White privilege is the result of over 400 years of racism and discrimination. I did not ask for it, but I do benefit from it – and so do my children.

So what do I do about my white privilege? It is this question that brings me to today's scripture – the story of Zacchaeus. Now some of you know this story – you've heard it before, but even if you are hearing it for the first time, you might have heard a story about a short man, Zacchaeus, who was rich, was a sinner, a tax collector, a chief tax collector and a cheat. How he climbed a tree to see Jesus and from his encounter with Jesus repented – changing his ways and became generous with his wealth.

This is the traditional telling and understanding of this story, but I am not sure it is the most faithful. Zacchaeus was a rich man. He was the chief tax collector. Now tax collectors at the time had a terrible reputation. First – it was their job to collect taxes for Rome, the occupiers, from their fellow Jews who were being oppressed by the Romans. Many tax collectors collected far more than what was required in order to pad their own pockets. It was a profession that lent itself to corruption and greed.

This is why when Jesus says that he will have dinner with Zacchaeus, the crowd murmurs and grumbles, that Jesus would spend time with such an obvious sinner. What is the evidence of his sin? His job, his vocation. He is a tax collector – so clearly he is a sinner.

Note that Jesus never calls him a sinner, nor does Jesus tell him to repent of his sins. Nor does Zacchaeus ever confess that he is a sinner. Instead we find out that Zacchaeus is extraordinarily generous. This is a bit confusing because many of our bibles mistranslate Zacchaeus generosity into the future tense: “I will give to the poor.” “I will pay back four times.”

But in the Greek – this is not the future tense but the present tense. Zacchaeus is not changing his behavior but rather defending himself against the murmurings of the crowd.

Zacchaeus is incredibly generous – he gives half his possessions to the poor, far beyond what was required by the law.

According to Jewish law, if you wronged someone you were required to pay them back the original amount plus 1/5 more. Zacchaeus goes well above and beyond this paying four times more. A practice which is only possible if you rarely defraud someone.

Nowhere in this story is there a confession of guilt or an indication of changed behavior – there is only the murmuring accusations of the crowd and the overwhelming joy of Zacchaeus that he gets to see Jesus.

Due to his job and wealth, the crowd has determined that Zacchaeus to be unworthy, but by every account it would seem that Zacchaeus is innocent. Even his name, “Zacchaeus” literally means pure or innocent.

Maybe this is not the story of a repentant sinner, but a crowd being called to task for their own assumptions and judgments.

However, there is one place where Zacchaeus is not innocent. Preacher and Biblical Scholar, Fred Craddock notes, “While nothing of the private life of Zacchaeus is revealed in the story, this much we know on principle: no one can be

privately righteous while participating in and profiting from a program that robs and crushes other persons.”

In other words, by being a tax collector, Zacchaeus is profiting from and perpetuating the system of Roman oppression. Zacchaeus is guilty of participating in a system of oppression.

Aren't we all? It is painful and unfortunate reality that we live in a matrix of cultural, political, historical and social-economic systems that tend to benefit a few at the expense of many.

White privilege and systemic racism is just one example to which we could add sexism and elitism, the irreparable damage we are doing to the planet, the global market which forces people to work in unsafe conditions so that I can save money.

The idea of stepping out of all of these systems is overwhelming and nearly impossible.

What can I do about white privilege? I cannot stop being white any more than I can stop being female or heterosexual. So what can I do? What do we do?

We look to Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a tax collector and by all accounts – he was good at it. Good enough to be made the chief tax collector. Zacchaeus has found his vocation.

Pastor and author Fredrick Buechner writes that vocation comes from the Latin “vocare” which means “to call”. It is the work a person is called by God to do. He goes on to say that you can discern your vocation by finding the work that you need most to do and the work that the world most needs to be done. In short he writes, “The place God calls you to, is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.

I think that Zacchaeus has found his vocation. He was good at tax collecting. Did he like working for the occupying Romans – a brutal regime that was oppressing people? Probably not. But he found that he could do his job in a way that ensured the fewest people were hurt. Furthermore, he was able to use his privilege and position to help those who needed it most. Zaccheaus found that place where his great joy and the world's great need met.

We could berate Zacchaeus and think that he should have quit being a tax collector – but what would that have done? What about the poor families he was supporting? They would have to go without. What about his diligence to make sure people weren't defrauded – and were overly compensated when they were? That would go away and the system would slip once more into corruption.

Zacchaeus found a way to work within the system to do God's work. He uses the Roman system of oppression to help the poor and care for those who have been cheated.

So how can we use the painful system we are in for good? What do we do about white privilege?

First we acknowledge it. We call it out and recognize it for the oppressive system that it is. We stop pretending that it doesn't exist. That might make us uncomfortable. That's ok. Discomfort brings transformation and growth.

Second, we have the ability to use our positions of privilege to actively dismantle systemic racism. We can use our voice to call out racism when we see it, hear it, or experience it.

We cannot sit back and allow systemic racism and white privilege to continue and comfort ourselves with the notion that "we aren't racist." We must become actively anti-racist. Working within the system to dismantle it.

Third and even more importantly, we silence our voice and create a space for black and brown voices to be heard. One of the best things we can do is stop being the loudest voice in the room.

Read African American authors and poets.

Watch movies and television shows with African American protagonists.

Worship at black churches – listen to black preachers.

Notice when black voices, protagonists and images are missing

Finally, we must acknowledge that we are not being anti-racist only to help our black neighbors but to help ourselves. That we cannot be all that God calls us to

be, we cannot live out our vocation to love God, love others and love ourselves while racism exists.

in 1963, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a letter from a Birmingham Jail to the white clergymen of Birmingham, Alabama. He confronts them and invites them to use their positions of authority and their white privilege to end segregation and discrimination. He writes this:

In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.”

Each of us has different abilities. Different experiences and different gifts. We have different callings and different vocations. Where you find your deep gladness may be different than mine.

Some of us are tax collectors.

Some are protest marchers.

Some are in powerful positions.

Some are musicians.

Some are letter writers.

Some are Freedom Riders.

Whatever your great joy is – whatever gifts God has given you that makes your heart sing – the world needs it now to expose white privilege and dismantle racism.

As some of you know, as part of my renewal leave, Gary and I did a Civil Rights tour of the south. We went to Little Rock, Arkansas, Sumner and Jackson, Mississippi, Selma, Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama. I learned so much about the struggle of the civil rights movement and how so many paid with their lives so that others would have freedom. I learned about the direct link from slavery to mass incarceration today. My eyes were opened to so much and helped me to realize I have so much more to learn.

One of the last places we toured was Bethel Baptist Church where I learned about Rev. Shuttlesworth. He was a huge part of the movement and I had never heard of him. I learned he let Martin Luther King be the face of the movement but he was the one pushing Rev. King because he was tired of waiting for change Bethel Baptist Church was bombed 3 times while he served there and the parsonage was bombed once and Rev. Shuttlesworth walked out unharmed.

Rev. Shuttlesworth had an urgency for change. While at Bethel Baptist, they shared a poem I want to close with, called Alabama Centennial by Naomi Long Madgett

They said, "Wait." Well, I waited.  
For a hundred years I waited  
In cotton fields, kitchens, balconies,  
in bread lines, at back doors, on chain gains.  
in stinking "colored" toilets  
and crowded ghettos,  
outside of schools and voting booths.  
and some said "Later."  
And some said, "Never!"

Then a new wind blew, and a new voice  
rode its wings with quiet urgency,  
Strong, determined, sure.  
"No", it said, "Not 'never', not 'later.'  
Not even 'soon.'  
Now  
"Walk!"  
And other voices echoed the freedom words,  
"Walk together, children, don't get weary."  
Whispered them, sang them, prayed them, shouted them.  
"Walk!"  
And I walked the streets of Montgomery  
until a link in the chain of patient acquiescence broke.  
Then again: "Sit down!"  
And I sat down at the counters of Greensboro.

Ride! And I rode the bus for freedom.  
Kneel! And I went down on my knees in prayer and faith.  
March! And I'll march until the last chain falls  
Singing, "We shall overcome."  
Not all the dogs and hoses in Birmingham  
Nor all the clubs and guns in Selma  
can turn this tide.  
Not all the jails can hold these young black faces  
from their destiny of manhood,  
of equality, of dignity,  
of the American Dream  
a Hundred years past due.  
Now!

May it be so! Amen.