



CELEBRATING JUNETEENTH

JUNE 19, 2020

1. The History of Juneteenth

Juneteenth—a blend of “June” and “nineteenth”—commemorates the end of slavery in the United States. The date, June 19, was chosen because on that date in 1865, slaves in Texas were the last to hear news of their liberation.

Slavery was made illegal two and a half years earlier, on January 1, 1863, when President Abraham Lincoln issued the “Emancipation Proclamation.” The Union was not able to enforce this proclamation until April 9, 1865, when General Lee surrendered, ending the Civil War. Texas, being the most remote slave state, received this news later than other states.

On June 19, 1865, Maj. Gen. Gordon Granger, of the United States Army, led a regiment of 1,800 Union soldiers to Galveston, Texas. He brought with him “General Orders, Number 3,” which stated:

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 personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor.

The celebration that followed this proclamation soon blossomed into an annual holiday—first in Galveston, then in the rest of Texas, then all throughout the United States.

In the 155 years since the first celebration, Juneteenth has seen its commemoration ebb and flow. At key moments in our nation’s history, like the civil rights movement of the 1960s and ‘70s, Juneteenth grew

tremendously. In more recent years, Juneteenth has seen a fresh resurgence, with 47 of our 50 states officially recognizing Juneteenth as a state holiday.

[Historian Kenneth C. Davis summarizes the significance of this day well](#), writing:

Juneteenth ... should be recognized for what it is: a shared point of pride in the symbolic end of centuries of racial slavery — a crime against humanity and the great stain on America’s soul. As meaningful as Independence Day itself, Juneteenth completes the circle, reaffirming ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ as the rights of all, not a select few.

2. Why Christians Should Care About Juneteenth

In short, Christians should care about Juneteenth because it marks a significant milestone in our nation’s pursuit of racial reconciliation.

Reconciliation is at the heart of the gospel and central to the mission of God. And among the many manifestations of oneness we are pursuing as a church, one of the most pressing is in the area of race.

The struggle for racial reconciliation is one God himself began as far back as Genesis 12 when he promised to reunite the ethnically diverse and contentious world through Abraham. It is a struggle whose victory is promised in Scripture’s final chapters, where we see the multiethnic restoration of all nations, tribes, peoples, and languages (Revelation 7:9–10). Most importantly, it is a struggle made possible by the gospel: Racial reconciliation is an inevitable fruit of the gospel of reconciliation.

The United States was founded not on ethnic identity but on the promise of equality for all. As Martin Luther King, Jr. often pointed out, however, our national history has revealed just how tragically we have failed to live up to our own founding ideals—and with devastating consequences. If we are to grow in reconciliation, we must come to grips with the racism of our nation’s past, mourning that racism and celebrating those moments—like Juneteenth—that struck significant blows against racism.

We celebrate Juneteenth, as Jemar Tisby writes, because it reminds us how far our nation has come, as well as how far we have to go. And as the people of God, we celebrate Juneteenth with an added level

of hope. True freedom and reconciliation come only through the gospel. In that way, Juneteenth acts as a shadow of a more fundamental reality: God, in his great mercy, is building his church to be a house of reconciliation and justice. And what he starts, he always finishes.

3. Celebrations of Juneteenth in Raleigh-Durham

[Juneteenth Celebrations in the Triangle](#). While many of the traditional Juneteenth events in Raleigh-Durham have been suspended due to the coronavirus, several celebrations remain. Here's a list of what's still happening and how you can join.

[blkfreedom.org, A Digital Celebration of Juneteenth 2020](#). Several museums are collaborating to produce a digital celebration of Juneteenth. Enter your email address for more information.

4. To Read, to Watch, and to Sing!

[Resources on Racial Reconciliation, June 2020](#), **The Summit Church**. Coming out of last weekend's service with Pastor J.D., Pastor Bryan, and our Communications Director, Janetta Oni, we provided this list of resources—articles, sermons, and books—for those who want to continue engaging the vital issue of racial reconciliation.

[“The Emancipation Proclamation,” Abraham Lincoln](#). The full text of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, given January 1, 1863, is traditionally read at many Juneteenth celebrations.

[“Lift Every Voice and Sing.”](#) Originally a poem written by James Weldon Johnson, and set to music by his brother John Rosamond Johnson, this song has been a hallmark of Juneteenth celebrations for over a century. The lyrics lament the injustice in our nation's past while calling on God to draw us toward a future of hope and unity. Here's a version performed by some of our Summit Worship staff.

[“Letter From Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) On April 12, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sat in a small, solitary jail cell in Birmingham, reading a newspaper article written by several white clergymen.

Dr. King immediately began composing a response in the margins of the newspaper itself. And four days later, having gotten some paper from his lawyer, he finished and sent the now famous “Letter From Birmingham Jail.” This letter was a thunderbolt in the battle for racial justice, and it remains a powerful wake-up call to this day. A lot has changed in the past 57 years, but the need for the church to lead in the fight for racial reconciliation is as pressing as ever.

[Juneteenth Is for Everyone](#), **Kenneth C. Davis**. Historian Kenneth C. Davis retells the history of the first Juneteenth, showing why this traditionally black American holiday should be celebrated among all Americans.