

Required Or Called? Micah 6:6-8; Luke 5:1-11

Carole DeHart

Sunday, June 18, 2023

This morning several of us joined in the Community Unity Walk from Fuller to Wheeler Park to celebrate Juneteenth. Now Juneteenth has been celebrated in many communities for 150+ years. In fact, this is the 29th celebration in Ann Arbor. It was never on my radar until three years ago.

June 19, 1865. That's the date Major General Gordon Granger issued an order proclaiming freedom to slaves in Galveston, Texas. I am mystified by this. Why did it take another order? Wasn't the Emancipation Proclamation enough? Well, as we have learned the language of the proclamation had unfortunate limitations and loopholes in it. Most of all it required the presence of Union troops to enforce it. For those in Galveston it was two and a half more years of additional slavery. Two and a half more years of being subject to another human being; even though we are all created equal according to our Declaration of Independence.

Information can be leaked quickly to inflict damage when desired, or slowly when it does not benefit the powerful or majority. And in the 1860s information could all too easily be controlled. I have no excuse. I only became aware of Juneteenth a few years ago. I must have missed that in my history classes. My first awareness of Juneteenth was early in the pandemic. My co-workers Shonagh, Amy and Debbie gathered on the Wesley lawn cheering for the Juneteenth parade as it passed by. Yard signs lined the sidewalk around the church. A new federal holiday was created in 2021.

The reason to celebrate Juneteenth is not the only portion of Black history that a member of the white majority may have missed. While attending a 2-year Spiritual Academy of the Upper Room, I was privileged enough to visit the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute along with the 16th St Baptist Church where a Sunday morning bombing by members of the KKK killed four Black girls. My eyes were opened more fully on a subsequent journey to the Montgomery/Selma area. We visited the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum encountering the prevalence of lynchings and walked the Edmund Pettus bridge where participants of the 1st Selma – Montgomery March suffered beatings at the hands of law enforcement. Since then, I have continued reading on related subjects. I have firsthand knowledge of the statement “the more you know the more you realize how much you don't know.”

I recently watched a documentary on Netflix titled Descendant. It's an incredulous story of 110 slaves brought to Mobile, Alabama from what is now Benin, West Africa. The passage was made aboard the ship Clotilda, owned by a prominent Alabaman plantation family.

It's appalling this voyage was made, especially that it happened in 1860. Atlantic slave trade was illegal and punishable by death and had been for 50 years. But cotton was booming, and more slaves were needed by a certain plantation. A “wager” was made and the Clotilda sailed for Africa. The criminality of their actions was known to the owners and captors, such that upon the Clotilda's return the boat was burned to hide the evidence in the Mobile River.

Freed from slavery five years later, the enslaved cannot afford to return to Africa. The greatest indignity occurs here. They must pool their meager cash and are forced to purchase land from their previous captor and owner. There certainly is no justice here.

The inhabitants and the descendants kept the secret because they felt it was too dangerous to talk about. And if you were talking about a prominent family that had the wherewithal to capture and bring slaves to America, what might be the consequences for the newly freed slaves? The story was shrouded in mystery beyond the community but handed down to descendants in the finest oral tradition .

So let's recap the highlights of this story.
Fifty years after the transatlantic slave trade abolished.
Trip made on a "bet"
110 individuals captured
Enslaved for five years and unable to purchase their own return to Africa.
Purchased what land they could from their previous owner
Created Africatown.
Land that is now surrounded by highways and industry
Land that was leased or purchased from owners of the Clotilda
The Clotilda is verified in 2019

What is that famous line? "You just cannot make this stuff up" or as Mark Twain said, "Truth is stranger than fiction."

How do these stories of injustice apply to us as Christians? And what do today's scriptures have to say on that subject? You have heard these before. The prophet Micah speaks to us in directives. Do justice. Embrace love. (love kindness) Walk humbly with God.

And at the beginning of his ministry, what does Jesus have to say to his future disciples? You didn't catch anything? Well then....Try again. Go a little further. Soon you won't be only catching fish. And what was their response after nearly overturning their boats with the overwhelming catch? They left everything and followed him.

We are surrounded by injustice everywhere. We may not see it in our neighborhood. We may not hear about it often enough because each story has its news cycle. But injustice is always there and always has been. We just don't know how close it is. We don't see it or in some cases choose to not know the extent of its pervasiveness.

Poverty, homelessness, Jim Crow laws, redlining practices of banks, understanding life as a black, indigenous or person of color in this country, the pipeline to prison practice of our justice system, uncertain access to health care, even today voting rights being diminished in many states, the inequality of education curriculum and resources across all communities.....I can't name them all.

We may be tempted to pat ourselves on the back since the passage of Civil Rights. In reality, I weep for neighbors near and far..... when I read headlines of another person of color a victim of an unprovoked shooting, or new state laws enacted restricting voting, health care access denied to portions of our population who happen to be in the LGBTQIA+ community. Or

reading that the Southern Baptist Convention voting that women shall be excluded from serving as pastors.

All of us are children of God, and we are called to build God's kin-dom here on earth especially those to whom much has been given. Let us love our neighbors, care for those with less. Do justice. Go further. If you believe in God, does it matter whether you are required or called? It is our individual response that truly indicate where our priorities are. Let our congregation respond with the same vigor of those first disciples. Follow Jesus. Follow him.

It doesn't mean giving up everything but....
It may take you on a civil rights pilgrimage to Alabama with your church family Jan. of 2024. It may include more conversations about racism. One of our church's priorities is still the pursuit to be an anti-racist church. Let's NOT move that to the back burner.

Following Jesus may find you serving at Hope Clinic or House by the Side of the Road assisting those who lack basic needs of food, shelter, clothing. Following Jesus could find you participating in a bible study you thought you might never do because "it's too much of a commitment." Micah asks what is required of you? To walk humbly with God. How can we do that if we aren't familiar with the words or stories of our faith? Yes, it's a commitment to follow Jesus, one worth dedicating a portion of your life to just as much as home and family.

We must never tire of telling the story, searching for truth lest we forget and repeat these inequities.

In The Faith We Sing, is our closing hymn entitled Would I Have Answered when you Called? written by Herman G. Stuempfle Jr., a Lutheran clergy. The hymn is a series of questions that challenges our balance of what feels safe and familiar verses what it means to follow Jesus Christ's teaching.

Would we have left everything like the disciples and followed Jesus? Stuempfle asks this of us:

*"Or would I soon have hurried back
where home and comfort drew,
Where truth you taught would not disturb
The ordered world I knew?"*

Because sometimes we are called to venture into an arena that is unlike anything we have done before. We learn things about our country, its people, or our history that do not sit well. It might even be inconvenient. Without glamour. Challenging. Hard. Difficult.

But when we choose to follow, when we make time for the pursuit of justice in our weekly calendar, then we can sing the closing line with great courage and abandon.

*"I only pray that when you call,
""Come, follow, follow me!""
You'll give me strength beyond
my own to follow faithfully."*

Do justice. Embrace Love. Walk humbly with God. Try again. Go further. Cast the net wider and find more neighbors.

O Holy God, give us strength to follow Jesus. Amen.