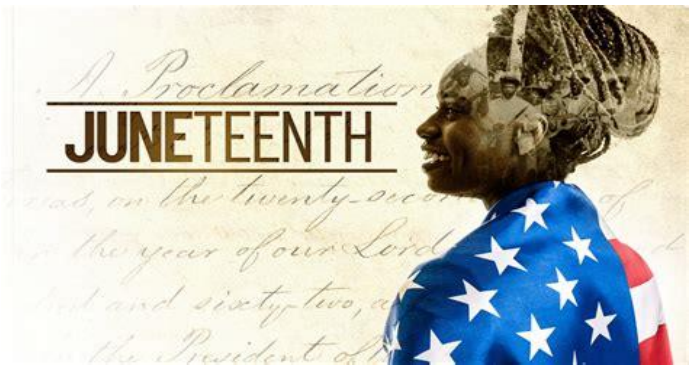

Juneteenth and Jesus

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 7C || June 22, 2025 || 9:30am St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Hanover, MA || 1Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a; Psalm 42 and 43; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39 || The Reverend Amy Whitcomb Slemmer, Esq.

Welcome to our entry into Ordinary Time – which is the longest season of the church calendar. It extends from this morning for the next 20 weeks, into November. This season which we identify by counting the weeks past Pentecost offers us an opportunity to study and learn more about Jesus' ministry, as we spend the summer and fall practicing those lessons that are offered in our scripture readings each week.

This morning's gospel story reads like the outline for a blockbuster movie! We have deep cultural and racial tensions, demons, a naked guy, flying or suicidal pigs, and, *eventually* a happy ending.

The social tensions in Luke's gospel are an undercurrent throughout, and are an important dynamic to understand this often overlooked and very busy scripture passage. Jesus is hanging out in an area populated by Gentiles, which made the faithful Jewish community members of the time either suspicious or dismissive. And as is Jesus' wont, he is ministering to an outcast - a man who is possessed by demons – in our modern framework, this man may have had severe mental illness, schizophrenia or an overpowering addiction to drugs or sex, or alcohol.

Whatever possessed him had driven him into isolation from society, had made him homeless, penniless and... clothing-less. The gospel describes his possession by demons as having made him a slave to them. As I just read, he was "under guard and bound with chains and shackles". This man is so accustomed to this broken, limited and isolated state of being that he begs and accuses Jesus to leave him be.

Instead, Jesus asks his name, "Legion" which to ancient listeners would have been an obvious and scary reference to the Roman soldiers (a legion was a group of 5-6k well trained Roman soldiers, who were known to embrace brutal tactics to enforce and maintain Roman Rule.

Jesus casts out the demons and allows them to enter a giant group of pigs which, as a result of the demons, hurl themselves down a hill and drown in the body of water below.

This is epic stuff! A block buster! Cut to a closing shot of the newly healed man, emancipated and free. Fully clothed, functioning back in society and now housed, which we know because Jesus tells him to return to his home and become an evangelist by telling others what God had done for him.

This enslaved man, possessed by whatever dark forces or addictions or illnesses was finally liberated to be his full and functioning self. And like all great blockbusters, our scripture alludes to a sequel. The people around this miraculous healing, the people of Gerasenes who have witnessed or heard tell of this healing are terrified and tell Jesus to (scram) beat it, which he does.

What a marvelous gospel story to read as a backdrop to our Juneteenth celebration – the first that St. Andrew's has held in our 300 year history. What a blessing to inaugurate almost anything for a community that has been established and gathered for Three Hundred Years! We date our beginning to 1725, yet, slavery was a fact of life in this country from 1619, when the first ship carrying people as property came to our shores. This sinful practice continued until 1865 for Blacks in the country, when the federal enforcement of emancipation happened in Galveston, Texas.

Slavery was also a fact of life in Hanover, the South Shore, Massachusetts and the New England colonies, which comes as quite a shock to the senses, if you, like I were educated to know that slavery was a southern thing, not for the intellectual and learned leaders of the North. Surely our local ancestors were all abolitionists, on the right side of history and God's expectations!....turns out NOT.

Slavery, though different in scope and somewhat in manner was part of the economics of the New England colonies. Let's focus for a minute or two on the enormous change, the fierce change of attitudes, heads and hearts that finally, FINALLY declared the freedom and sinfulness slavery. It will be my pleasure at some point for us to invite and host the great Episcopalian and former Representative in the State House, Byron Rushing to join us. One of the facts that he has been so clear and fearless about heralding is that the enslaved people of Texas KNEW about President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation but their lives did not change at all. It required federal troops to enforce the proclamation, and it is wildly complicated and totally sinful that it took so long to free our siblings in chains, but it did happen. And it is a joy to celebrate this important milestone, not just for Texas, or for our country, but a milestone for the world, when we joined with countries who had recognized the full humanity of people who were previously treated as, and believed to be not fully intelligent and capable siblings in Christ. Judged exactly by the color of their skin, without curiosity or honoring the content of their character. Preventing our black and brown siblings

from being their full selves, which must have made Jesus weep. The cruelty and barbarism inflicted upon his beloved children BY his beloved children – awful!

This morning's letter from Paul to the Galatians reminds all of us that, in Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female – we are all ONE in Christ Jesus.

Our faith calls us to be One – those of us who believe in Jesus and strive to practice the lessons he has taught us are called to recognize the face of Christ in ALL of God's children. To revel in the gorgeous diversity and breadth of gifts, talents and lived experiences. That is today's great news from this cinematic lesson. We all belong to Christ, and if I deny your divinity, I am limiting my own. If I deny God's love for all facets of humanity, or if I participate in racism or discriminate against or prejudge a person or group, then I am not living into God's expectations **or** into my full self and beloved potential.

I'm going to hazard a guess that not one of us, here gathered EVER intends to discriminate or limit, oppress or participate in racism, ageism, classism or ableism, or some of the new and emerging concepts – hetero- and cisnormativity. We are a loving and welcoming group. The truth is that we have to educate ourselves about what our social diseases or demons look like. We have to listen to the groups who are most impacted by incorrect assumptions and in the modern world, that can be very challenging. Our disenfranchised or dismissed siblings do not have a voice, or agency and most often, they totally lack a seat at decision making tables. Sometimes this requires EXTRA effort to be inclusive, to figure out what is preventing a group or marginalized person from being at the table. One of the lessons I thank the Black Lives Matters movement for is the reminder that, it is not the job of the black person, or the disabled person, or the indigenous person or the oldster among us to educate us or enlighten me, this is our work, our responsibility.

I am positive that I have lots to learn. The entire time we were working to bring Juneteenth alive in Hanover, I've been bragging about how many of you took the opportunity to read the article "Slavery in Hanover", and how many fruitful and meaningful discussions came from that shared experience. Many of us found it transformative.

The transformation required by the man named Legion in our gospel story required his vulnerability in being in the presence of Jesus. The education that we each seek about our own blind spots, biases and assumptions, requires the first, very small step, to say – "hmmph," I have stuff to learn. I want to better understand myself and God's expectations for the world.

We have twenty weeks ahead of Ordinary Time. What would it look like if each of us invested some of that time being vulnerable and curious about our own preconceptions? What might you like to learn or understand or offer to God for transformation between now and November? I am positive that God delights in our efforts. Perhaps in the next twenty weeks of Ordinary Time we can take shared steps toward embodying our true, full and authentic

selves as we invest intentional time and offer our vulnerability to better understand others. Wouldn't **that** be epic?

Amen+