

Devotion, Week of June 18, 2023

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

I never knew about Juneteenth until several years ago, I'm sorry to admit. I always just assumed that when Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, the slaves throughout the U.S. were freed, although I knew that until the south surrendered, they were probably still enslaved there. But that isn't all of the story.

Juneteenth commemorates the day, June 19, 1865, that emancipation was finally announced to and enforced for the estimated 250,000 enslaved in Texas. This happened two and a half years after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and more than two months after General Lee surrendered. Even then, it wasn't the end of legalized slavery in the United States. The Emancipation Proclamation only freed the enslaved in the Confederate states. Delaware and Kentucky, both slave-holding Union states, were not emancipated until the ratification of the 13th Amendment in December of 1865. Although Texas made it a state holiday in 1938, it was only last year that it was recognized as a national holiday.

Juneteenth is also celebrated by the Mascogos, descendants of Black Seminoles who escaped from slavery in 1852 and settled in Coahuila, Mexico. Celebrations have traditionally been held in local churches, with large meals thereafter. Red food and drinks are traditional during the celebrations, including red velvet cake and strawberry soda, with red meant to represent resilience and joy. It is a time to remember, to rejoice, and also to reflect on what we still need to do as a society to provide justice to those of all races. The transformative journey to freedom has never been a short or straightforward trip. There have been numerous struggles and setbacks. I am reminded of the 40-year journey of the Israelites to freedom out of Egypt, and the continuing struggles they encountered once they entered Canaan, the Promised Land.

We too in this country still have much to do. So let us all lift our voices and sing, "till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty."

Jeanne