

In 1776, the Continental Congress signed a document that declared “*we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*” Many Americans believe it declared that our nation was founded on the bedrock idea of freedom. But while the text of that document does declare freedom for “*all men*,” it was only referring to the freedom of white land-owning males. Which is an important fact to acknowledge.

That is because it took the framers until 1787 to get the Constitution approved, and to 1791 to ratify the 10 amendments called “the Bill of Rights.” It was not until we fought a Civil War, and the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments were ratified, that our nation’s laws actually declared ALL people free in every sense of the word. And we are still not to the place where ALL people are truly free - as we still see regular instances of prejudice, discrimination, and hate crimes.

For that reason, one of the phrases associated with Juneteenth is “*free-ish*.” For having the law declare someone free, but not having their freedom actually honored makes a person “*free-ish*,” but not truly free. Having politicians say they love freedom, but write laws that disenfranchise certain people only makes people “*free-ish*,” but not truly free. And having holidays where the language of freedom is invoked while our economic system enables those born into wealth to grow vastly wealthier while those not born into wealth have little ability to improve their economic situation only makes the vast number of us “*free-ish*,” but not truly free.

I don’t say these things to give a political speech. I say these things because we have the phrase “*one nation under God*” on our currency. And if we are seeking to be “*one nation under God*” we need to ponder certain things. We need to ponder what God says about where we have (and have not) acted like “*one nation under God*” in the past. We need to ponder what He says about how we act (or don’t act) like “*one nation under God*” right now. And we need to ponder how we should seek to live as “*one nation under God*” in the future. For if we don’t, we may say “*all men are created equal*,” and we all have “*certain unalienable rights*,” but not advocate for laws and policies that make us a nation where ALL people are truly free, and not just “*free-ish*.”

We see this reality in the passage from Isaiah. Its words may be familiar as Luke tells us in his gospel that after Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, He returned to the synagogue where He grew up, read the first two verses of what Isaiah wrote in what we label as chapter 61, and said “*today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*” That is because Jesus knew He was anointed to “*proclaim the good news to the poor.*” Jesus knew He was set apart to “*proclaim freedom to the prisoners, and recovery of sight to the blind.*” And Jesus knew He was sent to “*set the oppressed free*” by “*proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor.*”

Unfortunately, when we hear Jesus quote those words, we often boil them down to the idea that Jesus came to save us. But throughout the Bible, God says salvation involves more than going to heaven when we die. God says salvation involves making us right with Him in the here and now of this world. God says salvation involves making us right with His other children in the here and now of this world. And God says salvation involves the qualities of love, peace, and unity being operative

“*here as in heaven*,” just as Jesus would later tell His disciples when He taught them how to pray. We see this when we turn to the fullness of what the prophet Isaiah wrote.

That is because after he wrote the words Jesus would essentially make the mission statement of His earthly life, Isaiah said the purpose of the “*Spirit of the Lord*” would be to bring about “*the year of the Lord*.” The “*year of the Lord*” is another way of referring to the Year of Jubilee, the 50<sup>th</sup> year when debts were to be cancelled, loans forgiven, and slaves set free. That is because God intended ALL His children to live as free people, and not just live “*free-ish*” in new kinds of slavery in new places other than Egypt.

We see this when Isaiah then says the Messiah would “*comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve*.” We see this when Isaiah says the Messiah would “*bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, [and] the oil of joy instead of mourning*.” And we see this when Isaiah says the Messiah would offer those who were oppressed “*a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair*.” That is because the Messiah would come as the second Adam, as the Apostle Paul explained in Corinthians. And as the second Adam would undo what Adam did in introducing sin into the world by offering a new way to live where everyone can be truly free - and not free just from sin in general, but free from the sins that take away our freedom and the freedom of others whom we sin against. And we see the pattern of the new way of life our Heavenly Father wills for us to live in the event Juneteenth celebrates.

That is because on January 1, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared slavery illegal. And on April 9<sup>th</sup> of 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered, which ended the Southern refusal to release their slaves. But it was not until Union General Gordon Granger rode into Galveston, Texas on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1865 that the last of those still held in slavery were truly freed. For in Galveston, General Granger read General Order #3, which declared “*The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free*.” And that declaration of freedom was the one that finally opened the door to the possibility of true freedom being available to ALL persons in our nation. But it only opened the door.

In the years that followed June 19, 1865, there were still many ways freedom was denied to ALL people. There were black codes. There were segregated public spaces. And there were literacy tests for voting. And even though all those things are now illegal, discrimination and micro-aggressions continue to occur on an alarming basis. To change that reality, and to truly see our society become one in which ALL people are truly free, and not just “*free-ish*,” we need to truly live as “*one nation under God*.” For if we do, we will see a nation where ALL people have the inalienable rights they need to pursue the happiness God intended us to possess. As we ponder how to get to that place, I would suggest it involves three things: love, peace, and unity.

First, we need to let God’s love rule our hearts and lives. That is because until we do, we will not do the hard things needed to allow equality to be the norm in our interactions with others. For the kind of love we are talking about is agape, the unconditional love of God. For only that kind of love

will lead us to seek the well-being of others and not just our own well-being. And it is only as we seek the well-being of others as passionately as we seek it for ourselves that everyone will be truly as truly free as God desires, and not just be “*free-ish*.”

We see one small example of how to live in this way in an incident that occurred with a family that was in procession to a cemetery after the funeral of the family’s grandmother. As they came to an intersection, they found their way blocked by a parade. But seeing the funeral cortege sitting their, unable to finish their journey, several participants stopped the parade and allowed the cortege to cross. And they not only put their own event on hold to do so, those participants removed their hats and placed their hats over their hearts as the cortege crossed. That parade, the family found out later, was a Juneteenth parade. But some of those involved in it saw the need of someone in front of them, and responded with the unconditional love of God.

Second, we need to be at peace letting God’s love rule our hearts and lives. That is because if we are not at peace with living by God’s ways of love, which involves living in ways that seek everyone’s well-being and not just our own, we will not continue to do the hard things needed to allow equality to remain the norm in our interactions with others. So unless we commit to continuing doing those hard things, freedom will not continue to be experienced by everyone, and there will be such a lack of peace in everyone’s hearts that we will continue to be at war with one another. For it is only God’s ways of love that can enable true peace to exist. For according to God, peace is not the absence of difficulty but His reign in our hearts and minds in such a way that we overcome the divisions we think are separating us from others.

We see this displayed in Texas. As I mentioned, Texas was the last place slaves heard about their freedom. But it was also the first state where Juneteenth was declared a holiday. That is because throughout Texas, the African-American community celebrated that date, with land even being bought in several places for the purpose of such festivals. Over time, more people became involved, and in 1971 the celebration was finally named as a state holiday titled “Emancipation Day.” And when that happened, it took on a whole new tenor as it became a time for ALL the people of Texas to be at peace with one another despite the history of slavery.

Finally, we need to seek unity. That is because the ultimate goal of God’s love, and the only way to truly have peace between us and others, is if we realize that God doesn’t want us to just be tolerant of other people and their well-being, but to see - and interact with - them as beings who also were created in the image of God. This means that God wants us to embrace others as our brothers and sisters, seeking to focus our attention on what we have in common and not what is different. It means that God wants us to do so in a way that the barriers between us fall. And it means that God wants us to care for one another in such a way that everyone is truly free, and not just “*free-ish*.” That is because the true “*pursuit of happiness*” can only truly happen when that pursuit is done according to the ways God created us to live. And we can’t pursue happiness in the ways God created us to live without doing so in unity with others, caring for their needs and well-being as fully as we do our own.

We see this displayed in the fact that while it took 165 years, we now have a NATIONAL holiday that declares that ALL people are truly free, and not just “*free-ish*.” Not that we are fully there yet. As fallen and sinful creatures, we still find ourselves tempted not to let God’s love rule our lives. As fallen and sinful creatures, we still find ourselves tempted to not be at peace with letting God’s love rule our lives. And as fallen and sinful creatures, we still find ourselves too easily divided from God’s other children. So maybe it is a good thing that this year Juneteenth falls on Father’s Day.

For on this day, we not only celebrate how our earthly fathers cared for us, nurtured us, and provided for us, we also celebrate how God does those things in even greater ways. And since our Heavenly Father wants ALL His children to experience the freedom He intends for us in doing so, and not just be “*free-ish*,” we can this year honor Him by vowing to do everything we can to let God’s love rule in our heart and lives in how we treat others. We can honor Him by vowing to be at peace with letting God’s love rule in our hearts and lives in how we treat others. And we can honor Him by vowing to seek to live in such ways so fully that we actually are united with our brothers and sisters in the ways God intended when He created us to be truly free, and not just “*free-ish*.”