

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

Juneteenth – the Second Sunday of Pentecost: June 19, 2022

“A Brief Summary of the Black Episcopal Experience”

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Inspired by “Black and Episcopalian: The Struggle for Inclusion” by Gayle Fisher-Stewart

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church. Today we celebrate Father’s Day along with Juneteenth.

Juneteenth is now a federal holiday celebrated on the 19th of June to commemorate the emancipation of enslaved people in the US. The holiday was first celebrated in Texas, where on that date in 1865, in the aftermath of the Civil War, slaves were declared free under the terms of the 1862 Emancipation Proclamation. And yes, there is a two to three year difference from the declaration of freedom and the time it took to reach Texas, which is deemed to have been a planned delay of the Emancipation by those who desired to preserve slavery.

Last year, the Diocese of California declared Juneteenth a Feast Day of the Church, as part of the Church’s call to look more deeply into the response it has had to people of color and those of less “Anglican” roots. We are called as Christians to look into our history with truth; as the saying goes, once you are informed and know better, you can act better. So in honor of Juneteenth and all it means, I inform you today, so we may better transform our church in the future. Letting the truth set us free.

“A 2021 Racial Justice Audit conducted by the Episcopal Church acknowledges that systemic racism is embedded in the Church. Since its founding Episcopalians of color have in one way or another struggled to have the institution and its leaders recognize their dignity, power and gifts,” reads the report.

Since 1862 when slavery ended, it took until 2015 for an African American to be presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church. We all know him as Michael B. Curry. Our Church history is one that can not be ignored.

The Church of England, the Episcopal Church's foundation, was the dominant ecclesial force during the transatlantic slave trade. Therefore, the Church of England and later the Episcopal Churches in America owned slaves within their own right to serve the church. There are documents that indicate the church provided baptism for slaves, which in no way "has an effect on their enslavement." Thus, somehow missing the meaning of the readings we are presented with here today. Slaves were considered church property and taken into account as part of the church's assets.

In 1861 and during the Civil War the Episcopal Church split, creating the Protestant Episcopal Church of the Confederate States of America. Although this split was considered to be a response to Northern aggressions, upon further study, one finds out that slavery was the main concern, as Bishops desired to keep their slaves.

Through the Civil War period, and eventually at the reunification of the Church, it was clear and evident that, per Bishop Elliot of Georgia, "all enslaved be instructed on all things Episcopal." This eventually left Black Episcopalians educated in church matters with nowhere to serve.

At the end of the Civil War came Reconstruction and the federal government created the Freedman's Bureau to assist the newly freed enslaved. As we know, they were not that successful. In a parallel move, the Episcopal Church created the Freedman's Commission in 1865. Of course as expected, the group was led by a white priest. This organization later became the Commission of Home Missions to

Colored People. Their first report indicated that the church had done little for over two hundred years to assist Black people and reported, “the Episcopal Church goes to great lengths to exculpate itself from any responsibility for the conditions of blacks prior to their emancipation.” The church then made it a precedent that blacks should receive an education within the church system “least they be left to ignorant teachers of their own race who are leading them into the wildest excesses of delusion and fanaticism.”

In 1794 Absalom Jones, the first African American ordained priest in the Episcopal Church, founded the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas. This was the first Black congregation in the Episcopal Church that was to be fully governed by its Black members “forever.” But in order to do so, St Thomas had to agree that it would not request to send clergy or deputies to the Convention or to be involved with the governing of the Episcopal Church in its formality. These restrictions were rescinded almost 60 years later in 1863 when St. Thomas was admitted into the Diocese of Pennsylvania.

After St. Thomas began, other Black Episcopal Churches began to spring up and admit that “slavery was not part of God’s plan for Black people and that freedom in Christ meant emancipation in this world not in heaven.” However, this was not the reality in the South, with the exception of St. James in Baltimore. In the South there were no independent self-governing Black churches and no Black clergy. The next feat was to establish Black Bishops. There were many canons and regulations proposed at General Conventions to limit the scope of practice within the clergy for African Americans. In 1903 Rev. Miller preached a call to the Black Congregations to take charge of their lives and places within the white Episcopal Church. Due to Miller’s preaching, Black inclusion was brought up at the General Convention in 1904 and then again in 1907.

In the south during the Jim Crow era, Black and White congregants were not allowed to be side by side at the altar rail. Finally in 1962 John Burgess was elected suffragette Bishop to Massachusetts in charge of both Black and White congregations, while the South would not have a Black bishop until 1993.

I bring up these points and these dates because as one can see, our church choices have not included our brothers and sisters of color throughout most of its history. And the change for inclusion has taken centuries to come to pass. For those who say that this is old history, it only takes a brief survey to realize that this was not so long ago and still affects our church today.

I share with you this history, not to reprimand, punish or make you feel bad. History is here for us to learn from, and we can not shy away from our mistakes. Instead we are called to ask for forgiveness as an institution, and learn to move forward in a more compassionate way.

So that now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Let us begin our journey forward so we may eventually say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Amen