

Transfiguration
Dallas, Texas

1Samuel 17:57-18:5, 10-16

Psalm 133

2Corinthians 6:1-13

Mark 4:35-41

Although it is not officially observed by the Church, this past Friday was most definitely a feast day, at least in Texas. Friday was June 19, or as it has been known to the descendants of slavery in our state, Juneteenth. On June 19, 1865, a Union General landed at Galveston and announced the elimination of slavery in the United States. It was, of course, nearly two years after the Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln, which freed all enslaved people in the country, but enforcement had been predictably absent in the intervening war years. So, in a real sense, June 19, 1865 was the day freedom came to enslaved blacks in Texas. And ever since then, black Texans have observed June 19 as a day of celebration and remembrance.

I am struck by the dissonance of Juneteenth, a festival day celebrating a remarkable transformation in our society, the end of the practice of holding people in slavery in this country because of their race, and the recent killings at Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. On Wednesday, an unequivocally racially motivated 21 year-old walked into a prayer meeting at one of the most historic African-American churches in our country, adorned in symbols of bigoted apartheid, and cruelly gunned down nine unarmed men and women simply because they were black. Lest we forget, this is just one more act in the surge of violence perpetrated against African-Americans in recent months, the most surprising and glaring of which involved law enforcement, but this event is especially horrifying, given the location in a church and the number of victims.

Here it is, 2015, and we're celebrating the 150th anniversary of Juneteenth, and yet our society has obviously not rid itself of the vestiges of racial injustice and violence. We may no longer enslave people based on race, but rates of incarceration, murder, and poverty show that we have most definitely stalled in our progress toward a truly just society. We would like to think that in 2015 we are "beyond racism," but the truth is that as a society we have not ever fully repented of the terrible sin of racism, so it continues to infect and affect us in small and large ways. Like it or not, black lives continue to matter less in our society, and not only does this sad reality grieve the heart of God, but real people in real places are being hurt and degraded and even killed.

One day Jesus got into a boat with his friends to cross the Sea of Galilee. Having been there a few times, I can tell you it's not all that long of a crossing. Just a few miles of typically calm, smooth sailing. But this time a storm kicks up and howls at the disciples, and their boat starts to founder. As they grow more and more frantic in the face of the circumstances – fearing for their safety, for their lives – they look over at Jesus and

realize that *he's actually asleep* in the stern. And, in my estimation quite understandably, their fear turns to shock which turns to anger. They cry out to Jesus: "Do you not care that we are perishing?!" Don't you see what's happening? Don't you care enough to wake up and notice that we're dying here, Jesus?

I've been thinking a lot about that storm and those disciples and that question this week — "Do you not care that we are perishing?" — because we are very much in the midst of a storm as our society convulses once more about race and violence and guns. Those of us who haven't already succumbed to a fatalistic resignation to such horrors, who are resisting to temptation to just grow numb to body counts on the nightly news, we are looking around in the frantic hopes that someone, somewhere will finally get around to doing something about it this time. And much like the disciples in that storm-tossed boat, some of our black brothers and sisters are raising the same question posed to the sleeping Jesus: do you not care that we are perishing?

The overwhelming witness of Scripture, from the story of the Exodus to the words of the prophets to the poetry of the psalmist to the gospels of Jesus show us clearly and unequivocally that the cries of the victims, the suffering of those harmed by hatred and violence, fly up to heaven and break God's heart. If there is one thing that the Incarnation of Christ proves to us beyond a doubt it is that God knows the pain of suffering, and not only does he know it, God suffers when we suffer. This week, God knows and feels the pain of the families of these latest victims, these most recent dead in an needlessly long line of innocent people killed for no other reason than the color of the skin God himself gave them.

Yet even as God's own heart breaks at such events, we know that God is not impotent to respond. In the gospel, Jesus doesn't simply join the disciples in their terror when he wakes up. He doesn't weep along with them in the face of sure and certain doom. Nor does he throw up his hands and say, "Of course I care," then sit idly by as they all drown. He responds to the situation with confidence and power and *calms the storm*. He demonstrates his capacity to bring order from the chaos. Yes, of course I care that you are perishing!, Jesus says to them — not with empty words, but by intervening in the situation that was causing their demise.

We are in our own storm today, whether we're awake enough to notice it or not. We face issues of injustice and hardship that we should long ago have overcome. And as followers of Jesus, as those who are called and commissioned to be Christ's hands and feet in this broken world, we must follow his example and get serious about responding to the cry of our brothers and sisters who ask us, "Do you not care that we are perishing?" We must wake up and we must answer: not with the emptiness of platitudes, or the hollowness of mere sympathy, *but with power*. Clearly, Jesus possessed a type of power we do not. Yet you and I, we have remarkable power, first and foremost because of the gift of the Holy Spirit, but even more mundanely, we have

power because of who we are and where we live. I will use myself as a case in point. I am a white, upper-middle-class, educated, American male. I represent the most powerful class of people that has ever walked this earth. Now, you may not fit every single one of those demographics, but I guarantee you that you possess an extraordinary power to influence the world. We, the people of Church of the Transfiguration in Dallas, Texas, *we have power to speak peace to this storm.*

It could seem a small thing in the face of systemic racism and injustice, what took place here at Transfiguration this past week. 25 boys and girls from St. Philip's, a predominantly African-American school in south Dallas, along with about a dozen volunteers, joined us for Vacation Bible School. For five days we sang together, and prayed together, and had a heckuva lot of fun together. Yes, it could seem like a small thing. I mean, a racially diverse VBS at a suburban church isn't going to stop hate-filled killers from hurting people, or put an end to mass incarceration or racial profiling. And yet, for five days, as 115 kids of all different backgrounds and races played and prayed and learned about God together, the Kingdom of God became a little bit clearer, it came a little bit closer. It was indescribably holy to come to this place on Thursday and Friday, in the wake of Mother Emmanuel, and watch as the roles of host and guest blurred, as strangers became friends, as we became in the words of Desmond Tutu, the rainbow people of God. Events like this past week are one of our many answers to racism, because they help us transform more completely into the beautiful, diverse, and peaceful Kingdom of God.

It is time, brothers and sisters. In the face of the atrocities of this past week, and this past month, and this past year, Jesus is looking to us to respond: to show that we can and will act to still the raging, swirling winds and waves of injustice and violence that continue to hound us. 150 years after the first Juneteenth, 2000 years after Jesus stilled the storm, people are still crying out: "Do you not care that we are perishing?" Let us stand at the prow of our storm-tossed boats and claim the power that is ours and say to this chaotic and cruel world, "Peace be still!" And with the love and mercy and compassion of Christ as our instruments, with the fire of the Holy Spirit spurring us on, let us bring that peace to life.