

Juneteenth

St Paul's-Oakland June 15, 2024

The Rt. Rev. Austin K. Rios

“Disciples forming Centers of Gathering and Transformation”

Before beginning, I want to thank The Rev. Dr. Mauricio Wilson and the people and clergy of St. Paul's Oakland for hosting this eucharistic gathering.

I'd also like to express our appreciation to the Afro-Anglican Commission of the Diocese of California and the Northern California Vivian Traylor Chapter of the Union of Black Episcopalians for sponsoring today's event.

The people and clergy of the Diocese of California are honored to serve with you, and Bishop Marc and I give thanks for your gracious hospitality, careful planning, and the never-failing love that went into making this commemoration day so special.

Thank you!

One of my earliest memories as a child was playing in the sand on the beach at Galveston, TX.

As I used my plastic alligator's jagged mouth to shovel sand into a red pail, and gazed out over the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, I could not even begin to imagine the larger history that wrapped around that place.

I was just barely more than a baby.

I had no context for imagining a world where some were slaves while others were free.

I had no framework for imagining a divided world where some were Jews and others Gentiles, where some were first class citizens and others were lesser class outsiders, a world where the God-given blessings of being male, female, or non-binary serve as well-defended dividing lines on a vast cultural battlefield where defeat and destruction for all is assured.

No, I had no clue such a world existed as I ran in the gentle waves with other children on that beach.

I've never been back to Galveston, and over 45 years have passed since the limitless world I knew as the sand poured between gator mouth and red pail.

But my mind turns to Galveston every year that we celebrate Juneteenth, and we commemorate the day, two and half years after the Emancipation Proclamation, when the Union Army marched into the city to ensure that all those still suffering under the hard yoke of chattel slavery would do so no more.

Texas, the state of my birth, was on the edge of the recently defeated confederacy and enforcement of the Proclamation required the presence of Union troops who had only recently finished fighting the Civil War.

On June 19, 1865 the executive order stating “that all persons held as slaves within said designated States, and parts of States, are, and henceforward shall be free” finally reached the beach and streets of Galveston, TX and the ringing bells of freedom began to reverberate throughout the state of Texas and the larger world.

We who gather here at St. Paul’s stand in the light of our ancestors.

Some of those ancestors knew the stony road of slavery intimately, and some of our ancestors wielded the bitter chastening rod.

They all inhabited a world that legally justified the enslavement of human beings and considered slaves as something less than human—in order to support the endless pursuit of material wealth.

And we give thanks for the blood of our forebears, both the shared blood that runs in our veins as their descendants, but also the symbol of their struggle to rise from the depths of dehumanization into the new dawn of freedom.

And yet, as we hear Amos’ words, “Let justice roll down like waters” echoing through the life and witness of the Rev Dr.—and earnestly pray that “righteousness may flow like an ever-flowing stream” in our own time—

We can look back on the 159 years between now and then and know that we have to go further than what human law requires if we are going to get anywhere near the beloved Community to which Christ calls us.

Legal slavery led to Jim Crow, led to Tulsa, led to Emmitt Till, led to Bobby Hutton, led to redlining, mass incarceration, and the necessity of still insisting in the year 2024, after so many siblings have died, that Black Lives Indeed DO matter.

How long O Lord, How Long?

The law is important and should enshrine our highest goals and aspirations as people in a democratic society who honor one another and seek the common good.

But we keep finding ourselves so FAR from there.

Especially now, in this year.

Instead of feeling like we are moving on up as a people, it feels like our common humanity is still up for debate.

In fact, it feels more ok than ever to look at a brother or sister or sibling and imagine “I have no need them.”

Easy to deceive ourselves with the lie that emerged from the serpent’s mouth in the garden—you are different from others-you stand alone like God.

I’ve been amazed at how eager we’ve become to develop callouses around this lie.

Eager to think that a more loving and connected world where goodwill and mutual prosperity guide us is nothing but a shabby fantasy to be mocked and eliminated.

And yet, we who know the one who was scourged and mocked and broke the chains of death forever, can never let this lie hold sway over us.

We who gain hope from the one who wrote: “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”—that patron saint for whom this community of faith is named—we must be people of the truth, disciples of reconciliation, and symbols of the dream for which we pray, work, and live.

People of the truth, disciples of reconciliation, and symbols of the dream.

But Bishop Austin, how do we do that? How do we become beloved community when our lives are so isolating, the news is so disheartening, and the climate so unpromising?

My encouragement would be to begin with yourself and begin with community.

Embed the spiritual practices that lead to life in your daily routines, find ways to pray with others in spoken and silent ways, and open yourself to collaboration with the Holy Spirit for the healing of the world.

The more you are able to deepen your discipleship to Jesus, and see your life beginning to take on a Christ-like shape—more loving, more connected, more forgiving—the more you will be drawn to forming healthy community with others.

This is what our churches should be about—centers for community gathering and transformation.

Imagine if we did more of that hard but necessary work of community gathering and transformation rather than slipping into pettiness and church politics. (From I heard to I heard)

We might know those rare joys that our forebears knew.

We might see our lives as an important and necessary part of the movement to repair the breach, and to become restorers of streets to live in.

We might stand up in the spaces we inhabit and announce the year of the Lord's favor instead of the Day of Doom.

And yes, some will resist the truth, reconciliation, and connected community that gives us life.

And staying true to our God and true to our native land will take our all and requires a fortitude that only sustained prayer in community can forge.

But when we support one another pastorally, and we grow with each other through shared experience and discipleship, we develop a level of resistance to the hardships that may face us, because we do not face such hardships alone.

And a community of gathering and transformation that cares for one another, soon can become a community that cares for its neighbors and seeks to partner with them in repairing the breach and restoring streets to live in.

It takes years for these kinds of cultural transformations to sprout and mature.

And we live in an impatient age, with little taste for the tortoise-like pace of return on such personal and communal investments.

But we, the people of the mustard seed, the ones who know a little bit of oil can multiply and satisfy, the people who know what it means to pass through many waters, the ones who are called to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor—

We have to be about intentional daily practice leading to life in the long run.

Each day can become a foretaste of the perfect freedom we will eventually know.

Each day we can plant seeds of love for ourselves, our churches, our communities, and our larger world—seeds that will grow over time into the infrastructure of community strength and resilience.

We can study scripture together, we can share communion together, we can march together, we can serve our neighborhoods together, we can partner with other churches and other organizations to improve life in our part of the Bay and beyond.

God will be among you as you gather, God will guide you into a deeper form of discipleship and trust, God will shed grace on thee and lead you in right pathways for His name's sake.

You will be part of the multitude that announces freedom to those who've lived in bondage—from Galveston to Ghana—from Oakland to Sacktown—the Bay Area and back down—

You will be one in Christ Jesus—no longer under a disciplinarian but as freely serving disciples— called in your baptism to die to the lie and rise to the truth.

And that will bring you life, a peace that the world cannot give, wealth that neither rust nor moth can take away.

Pursue that path together dear friends, dear siblings, dear children of God.

I can think of no better way to commemorate Juneteenth and let Galveston's freedom ring throughout the years.