

Juneteenth

June 16, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Please, will you pray with me.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable to you, oh God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Beloveds, it is impossible to look out on this sanctuary and on all of you today without remembering the utter JOY, the tears, the fullness of last week. WOW. The choir's depth and gorgeousness echoing back and forth from the balcony to the chancel. Dan sharing a last thumb war with Danyson as they prepared to take part in the litany and water ritual. Deep breaths together, and laughter. Holding ourselves and each other as we sang "Sanctuary." The power of that release of vows. And the PARTY! The tributes, the gifts, the cupcakes to meet every possible dietary need, the streamers painstakingly hung, the poke that just kept on coming, like a true loaves and fishes story.

There are a couple of moments that I can't stop thinking about. In our preparation for the Bon Jovi flash mob, we thought that maybe the second verse would be a time when people could go into the pews and encourage people to dance. But I don't even know if the words to the song itself had even *started* yet before I saw what seemed to me like ALL of you rise to your feet, in body or spirit, and give it your absolute all. The lights! The pom poms! The sunglasses and the strutting! In the words of our beloved Phil Jones, you all brought "more hype than the UCC has ever seen!"

And then there was the moment that I looked out at the congregation as we were being led through “Amazing Grace” by the incomparable Issa Bibbins, and our hands were raised in prayer and blessing, many of our eyes were closed. We let ourselves be filled by the music and our bodies became conduits for its grace, amplifying and spreading and expressing it through our voices joined together, through our hands.

First Church, last Sunday was incontrovertibly about how much we love Dan and will miss him and celebrate the gifts of his twenty years of ministry among us. AND, it was also totally and completely about all of YOU – about what is possible when we align ourselves with the Spirit, collaborate with each other, and allow ourselves to be well used by God in the service of love and justice.

This is what I want to meditate on today, on this Juneteenth Sunday, on this first Sunday after saying farewell to our beloved Senior Minister: the ways in which building God’s kin-dom of love and grace and collective liberation is a **partner dance**. God makes a move and we make a move. Amazing grace rains down and we open our hearts and our hands to reflect and amplify it. God offers the energy and we embody it. We wade in the water and God troubles it in response.

I learned this phrase – partner dancing with God – from a friend of mine, Will Scott, who guides rites of passage ceremonies in the wilderness. He talks about how God and Earth, or God as Earth, comes in to shape and mold our human experience – to help us meet ourselves, each other, and Spirit in new ways. We go out into the wilderness with a particular intention, and God partner dances us back, shifting our course. The sheltering grandmother tree in the sweltering heat that allows us to rest. The way an unexpected

thunderstorm rattles us and teaches us how to pray for real. Waters of a deep stream when we are thirsty. The maze of stony washes that leads us off our intended path and makes us meet ourselves differently in the course of being lost. Our path is not determined solely by our will and intention, but by the way that God responds to and shapes our movements.

Our readings today speak to this collaboration between people and the emergent life force we call God. Mark tells us, "'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'" The Earth produces of itself, the life force of God grows and animates the grain, but we are the ones who must scatter the seeds, who wake and sleep and wake again as we wait for the seeds to grow and sprout, who are ready to harvest the grain when it is ready. The harvest is a collaboration between us and God – our labors and God's enlivening spirit.

And, Mark seems to say, sometimes all God needs is a small assist, a series of small actions, from us. We plant a tiny mustard seed, and God grows that mustard seed into "the greatest of all shrubs," a tree in which all God's beloved creatures can find shade, comfort, and rest.

I want to say today that our work of liberation is the work of planting seeds. It is the daily work of collaborating with a God – as it was in the centuries leading up to the abolishment of slavery, as it was in the two whole years between the Emancipation

Proclamation and the moment – marked on Juneteenth – when enslaved Africans in Texas got free, as it was all through the years of Jim Crow and the organizing of the Civil Rights Movement and as it is now as we continue to work together, stitch by stitch, seed by seed, to free ourselves and our society from white supremacy. God longs for us to be free, to be whole, to be collaborators in making God’s kin-dom on Earth where all beings are held in their God-given belovedness and dignity.

Juneteenth helps us remember the strong, wide-branched tree of liberation that can sprout from the small daily mustard seeds we plant. The seeds that our spiritual ancestors planted with abolitionist organizing, decades before the civil war, unable to see the future and unsure if they would ever get to live in a world in which chattel slavery was no longer. They planted the seeds anyway. The seeds of those formerly enslaved people who dared to tell and publish their stories. The seeds of prayer and song that bore so many to spiritual freedom in the midst of bondage – that allowed them to cast a vision of a free life and a free world even if they imagined they wouldn’t get to see it in their lifetimes or even in their grandchildren’s lifetimes. The seeds of doors opening to shelter people who were running from their enslavers. The seeds of daring raids that the organizers knew would likely end in their death – but seeds that they planted anyway because they were called to be collaborators with a God who longs for freedom for all Her beloved people, called to be part of growing the mustard tree of justice and wholeness even if it took many generations beyond them to bear fruit. Juneteenth reminds us that in our partner dance with God, we do not get to see the outcome, but we dare to dance anyway, we dare to plant the seeds, day by day, so that God’s enlivening and often surprising spirit can animate those seeds into growth.

Getting free is always a partner dance with God. In a few minutes, we'll sing a song – “Wade in the Water” – that is deeply connected, of course, to these beautiful banners behind us. We'll sing, “wade in the water, children – God's gonna trouble the water.” I'd learned as a kid that this was a freedom song, functioning perhaps as some old spirituals did to both comfort and clandestinely share information about getting free – wade in the water as you're running toward your freedom, because the water will help your pursuers and their dogs lose your scent. The water will protect you. But I never fully understood what it meant for God to “trouble” the water until I was in undergrad and had the chance to transcribe an interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon, who had led the SNCC Freedom Singers during the Civil Rights Movement and who went on to start Sweet Honey in the Rock. She said:

“The only way you can translate Trouble is *transformation*, a stirring, mixing stuff up so there's a possibility of change... The Bible story [that that spiritual is based on] is about an angel coming and stirring up water at a pool, once every twenty some-odd years. The first person who got into the pool would be healed. So troubling, troubling the water, trouble in the air, is actually transformation.”¹

Troubling the water is transformation. God is ready to stir up the water, ready to help us get free, ready to heal us – but we must partner dance with God. WE must wade in the water so that God can trouble the water. WE must plant the seeds so God can grow the tree. WE must find the courage, together, to cast a vision of a world healed of racism and oppression and then work to make it so, with the help of God.

¹ Reagon, Bernice Johnson. Interview by Ashia Troiano and Meheret Shumet. Personal Interview. Swarthmore College, March 2011.

Lately, I've been praying to Harriet Tubman as a spiritual ancestor in this work of liberation from white supremacy.² Harriet was a powerful collaborator with God. She was a wilderness guide who knew something deep about the ways that God partner dances with us through the Earth. She sustained a serious brain injury as a child as part of the daily violence of chattel slavery, and that injury ushered in vivid dreams and visions that Harriet took to be messages from the divine and instructions about how to get free and help others get free. She was relentless in the ways she partnered with the divine – able to cast and hang onto a vision in which all were free, and then courageous enough to make trip after trip into territory where she could easily have been killed or re-enslaved for the sake of guiding others to freedom. She partner danced with God, over and over again, as if her life and others' depended on it, which, of course, they did.

I want to ask us today what it would look like for us to partner dance with God in this work of collective liberation as if ALL of our lives depended on it, because they do. White supremacy costs every one of us in different ways. When we stitch the names of our First Church spiritual ancestors who were enslaved, we remember the ways that white supremacy cost them their freedom, diminished their dignity, and often separated them from their families. We remember the ways that white supremacy sought to separate them from their innate and God-given belovedness. And we also remember the ways that white supremacy eroded the humanity of the white members of our community who worshiped in this building with them – the ways it taught white children to separate themselves from others, to place themselves above others, to distrust their neighbors, to see the world as if there isn't enough for everyone. We remember the parts of their own souls that enslavers like my ancestors had to kill in

² Thank you to this piece by Adrienne Maree Brown for helping to seed some of these thoughts in me: "Harriet is a North Star," published on September 24, 2017. <https://adriennemareebrown.net/2017/09/24/harriet-is-a-north-star/>

order to be able to treat fellow human beings the way they did. White supremacy makes *all* of us sick, and therefore reparations is life-saving work for every one of us.

Stitch by stitch, seed by seed, we mourn, we remember, we seek to mend the torn cloth of our belonging with each other, and we plant the possibility of world healed of the sickness of racism. We dive our needles into fabric, and God partner dances us back by weaving our connections with our ancestors across time.

We move money to the reparations fund and God animates that money to do the work of justice and repair in the world. Over the next couple of weeks, I'd love for each of us to sit with this question – what might it look like to move money to the reparations fund in a way that honors that *all* of our lives depend on liberation from white supremacy? What might feel like an investment in reparations that is edgy enough to remind you that your life, and the lives of your beloveds and descendants, depends on this kind of repair? One of the statistics I've learned in organizing for reparations is that the average working-class Black woman moves at least 10% of her resources to her community each year. 10% looks different for each of us, depending on our access. But it's a good metric to begin to feel into what it might look like to risk remembering that each of our lives depends on the spiritual and material work of repair. One trip, one raid, one stitch, one story, one prayer, one movement of money, over and over again, seed by seed – our people are free.

This is what we are here to remember and claim today: that our God is a God who longs to be our collaborator in getting free. That our God is a God who takes, as the book of Ezekiel tells us, a tiny sprig from the lofty top of a cedar, plants it on the top of a

mountain, and grows it into a mighty tree that shelters and feeds all of God's children. That our God is a God of surprises, and that we never know when the world will shift, dramatically, after so many years of prayer and concerted action, as it did for the enslaved people in Texas on that first Juneteenth 159 years ago. They may not ever have imagined that they would get to live free from bondage in their lifetime and then, one morning in June, after a lifetime of planting seeds and prayers for freedom, they were free. Juneteenth shows us that when we continue to plant our mustard seeds in daily ways, when we dare to partner dance with God as if our lives depend on it, *everything* is possible. Because our God is a God who brings low the high tree and makes the high tree low, Ezekiel tells us. Because our God is the life force that grows the grain, that grows the biggest bush from the tiniest seed, Jesus taught and Mark retold, if we but plant the seeds. Because our God is a God who troubles the water if we dare to wade in it. Because our God is a God who longs for us all to be free and well because she loves each of us so much.

And so, beloveds, this week and every week, go out and plant the seeds of repair, of liberation, of reparations because our lives depend on it. Wade in the waters of grief and remembrance and healing. Move money to the reparations fund and to Black-led organizing in general. Sing out. Dare to investigate the ways that white supremacy is making *you* sick. Say the names of our Black and indigenous ancestors at First Church with the love and reverence they have always been worthy of. Spend some time with this gorgeous gift of memory and honoring after church. Ask yourself: what is the mustard seed that I can plant today that, with God's help and alongside all the seeds that others are planting, might someday sprout and grow into a whole flourishing ecosystem of justice and healing?

This week, and every week, with the same gusto that you each brought to “Livin’ on a Prayer,” with the same collectivity of our conga line led by Ben Brenner, with the same energy and confidence as BBB strutting across that stage and Campbell Pelton-Cairns dancing in the aisles, with the same enthusiasm as Holly riffing up here on her air guitar, with the same JOY that you all brought last week – this week, day by day, dare to partner dance with God. AMEN!

Prayers for the church and the world:

L: God be with you.

C: And also with you.

L: Let us pray...

Loving God, we give thanks today for the strength and joy of our community. We give thanks for all the hard work and prayer, seen and unseen, that went into our celebration and leave-taking last week, and for the ways you are with us in this time of goodbye and transition. We ask that you stay close with us throughout this season – be in our breath and guide our steps as we navigate this new terrain together.

Father God, we give thanks on this Father’s Day for the good ways we have been fathered, by our own fathers or by other father figures in our lives. We honor the complex emotions that can come up when we recall relationships with our human fathers that were less than perfect, the grief and praise that comes when we remember fathers and grandfathers who have joined the ancestors, or when we reflect on our own frail yet mighty attempts to leave a legacy. And we honor each member of our community who is a father, and each person who does the work of loving, nurturing, guiding, and protecting the young and vulnerable.

God of the mustard seed, bless our work of reparations, remembering, and liberation today and every day. Help us be courageous, help us find our edge and lean on each other, and give us the heart to engage this work faithfully, knowing that our lives depend on it.

We pray today for all in our community who are struggling with physical and mental health challenges, for old and young and everyone in between, for those among us who are grieving losses in this season, for our staff in this season of change, and for all those who come through our church building seeking shelter, community, and help. May we be reflectors of your light and love to each other.

And we pray for your beloved world, oh God. We remember how you shaped the world from the deep waters, how you formed each place and creature. For peace where there is war, for comfort where there is suffering, for ease where there is fear, for love and justice where there is oppression, we pray. For our courage to breathe and hold each other as we witness the suffering in the world, that we might not turn away and instead alchemize our grief into loving action.

God of liberation, on this Juneteenth Sunday we pray in thanksgiving for all Black members of our community, past and present, and all the beautiful ones to come. We give thanks for each of their unique and precious humanity, made in your image, which we honor today with our Wade in the Water banners. We pray that together, with your help, we might continue to make a world where all people are held, by their neighbors and by the systems that shape our society, in their God-given belovedness and dignity.

We pray all this for love's sake and in Jesus' name, praying the prayer that he taught us:

**All: Our Creator, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive
those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us
from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

Benediction:

Beloveds, as we go from this place to plant our mustard seeds and sew stitches of remembrance and repair, may God dance with you gently and trouble the waters when you wade in them. May the life force of God be with you, surround you, and bless you today and all days, for each of you is dearly beloved by God. AMEN!