

“David v. Goliath Round 2: Opal Lee and the Juneteenth Holiday!”

By Steve Ramer
June 20, 2021

Scriptures (Leviticus 25:8–13)

8 You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. 9 Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. 10 And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.

It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. 11 That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap ...For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces. 13 In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property.

Sermon

On June 15, 1939, Otis Flake moved his family into their newly purchased home on East Annie Street in Ft Worth, TX. Following four nights of riots outside their home, on June 19, a mob of around 500 folks finally forced them into the streets and after removing the furniture set the house on fire. No one was ever arrested or even investigated for this crime, a crime that was solely based upon the fact that the Flake family was black and their new home was in a white neighborhood.

Local police were on the scene each night and not only had they failed to control the mob but additionally informed Mr. Flake when they learned he had a gun that, *“if he busted a cap, they’d let that mob have him.”*

But in spite of her childhood trauma, Otis’ 12-year-old daughter, Opal, would go on to dedicate her life (quite a significant achievement since she is now 94!) to the making June 19 a national holiday. For decades she led local and state efforts to commemorate what is commonly called Juneteenth.

Then in 2016, in the final months of the Obama administration, she decided to take her efforts nationwide and to Washington and so at the ripe young age of 89 she walked from Ft Worth to DC. Last September she delivered 1.5 million petition signatures and then finally this past spring a bill was introduced in the House.

This past Thursday she was present at the White House, looking over President Biden’s shoulder as he signed the bill creating June 19th as a Federal Holiday. A fire meant to intimidate and destroy the hopes of a black family in 1939, instead lit a flame of justice in the heart of a little girl!

In a recent interview, Opal said this about that earlier tragedy of 1939:

“If they had given us an opportunity to stay there and be their neighbors, they would have found out we didn’t want any more than what they had - a decent place to stay, jobs that paid, [to be] able to go to school in the neighborhood, even if it was a segregated school. We would have made good neighbors, but they didn’t give us and opportunity. And I felt like everybody needs an opportunity.”

And so once again, just like David who stood up to Goliath, and aided with time and perseverance, a youthful Opal Lee won! The bill that the President signed into law was actually passed unanimously by the Senate with only 14 Republicans (the party of Lincoln!?) voting against it in the House. Most certainly this recognition is long, long, (shall I say it again?) long overdue and another painful reminder of the horrors of white supremacy in our nation’s past.

Now I’m sure that I probably take too much delight in bashing Texas for a lot of backwards kind of thinking but for your information, Texas actually made Juneteenth a paid state holiday in 1979!

Of course, adding another holiday that will only affect Federal workers will also most certainly not cure the deepest injustices caused by hundreds of years of racial theories that tried to prove the inherent inferiority of people with dark skin pigmentation. But like so many other reminders it can become a moment both of speaking truth to power as well as another opportunity for some of us to learn what white history books have left out.

Case in point, I am sure by now most of you now know what actually happened on June 19, 1865. On that day, soldiers under the command of Union Major General Gordon Granger began marching throughout Galveston Island, Texas, reading General order #3 which stated:

The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor.

But I’m guessing there are a couple pertinent facts that you might not be so well aware of? Even though President [Abraham Lincoln](#) had issued the [Emancipation Proclamation](#) on September 22, 1862, it did not become effective until January 1, 1863.

And even at that time it did not apply to all slaves in the U. S. It applied only to enslaved persons in residing in the [Confederate States of America](#) that were in rebellion to the US – those slave were emancipated. However, it did not apply to slaves living in the states of Missouri, Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Delaware, and Maryland, because those states were fighting on the side of the Union.

In fact, slaves in Delaware and Kentucky would not be freed until December 18, 1865, with the ratification of the 13th Amendment. Then on June 19, 1866, freed slaves in Texas organized the first celebration of "Jubilee Day" which eventually became annual celebrations. These early celebrations were used as political rallies to give voting instructions to newly freed African Americans.

Personally, I did not become aware of Juneteenth until moving to Washington, DC, a predominantly African American city where it was still being commemorated after more than a century.

Last Sunday I tried to make clear the great distinction being made between the respective statures of David and Goliath. The fact it was not supposed to be a fair fight is of course central to the story. David was a youth (teenager perhaps?), good looking, but a whole lot smaller and much less experienced than Goliath. He also refused to wear any armor or carry any real weapon - only a slingshot and five smooth stones that he had quickly managed to scrounge from the bed of a nearby creek.

Goliath on the other was not only a giant by the standards of his day, but a highly trained and very experienced gladiator as well. He took great offense that someone as puny as David would be sent out to engage him in mortal combat, calling David a dog that he would easily tear limb from limb before feeding him to the birds!

My genuine hope is that you will go home and immediately google the name Opal Lee in order to be even more inspired by her story!

And when you do you will find a rather, petite, elderly woman who began slaying the giants of racism at the age of 12! No doubt she has lost some battles along the way, but in the end, none of those giants were in any way her match! In fact, Like David, it was never even a fair fight. The Goliaths of white supremacy were never any match for the size of her spirit and the desire for her and her people to be free! It just ain't a fair fight, my friends, when God's Spirit of liberation takes hold of people.

Now I apologize for my cynicism, but I fear that many politicians will feel that their job is now done. "We gave you another holiday, so problem fixed!" But those of us who believe in freedom must counter, "Thanks but a Holiday is just the beginning!"

It is only a beginning and it should become, as they say, a teachable moment so that we at least don't repeat our past mistakes. But for true healing, we must act justly to correct the past injustices. Juneteenth must mean more than just another shallow opportunity for deep holiday discounts on electronics and mattresses!

Sadly, we do not need to look too far or too intensely to find suitable issues to start taking action on. Considering that the earliest Jubilee anniversaries included voter education, we must fight those Goliaths who are trying to suppress democracy in our nation. Hundreds of voter suppression bills in at least 49 states (which leaves only

tiny Vermont seemingly immune to this pandemic) are targeting black and brown voters. COVID once again exposed the lack of fundamental health care for persons of color in our nation. Disparity in incomes, employment, education and access to wealth has also increased over the past decades for black and brown.

These issues can only be addressed by significant government investments in communities of color. Some form of economic reparations must be paid in order to address these disparities that are the result not only of slavery but for those victimized by Jim Crow policies in the south and systemic discrimination in the North.

Yes, it will be difficult, and yes, it will be expensive, but nothing else will seriously address these issues. Besides, is also just flat out the right thing to do. We must all find a way to act justly in response to 400 plus years of systemic white supremacy here in the U. S.

But we also must celebrate the victories that have resulted from the struggle! In fact, I celebrated Juneteenth yesterday by finishing this sermon! But if you didn't get a chance to celebrate Juneteenth yet - by all means please find a way! Because that little gal, who lived on Annie Street in Ft Worth, TX, went to battle on all our behalf and she won!

Get to know her story and take inspiration from her so that you too can find courage - courage to both pray for justice and to work for justice until it comes!

Steve Ramer

Pastor Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship
300 E. Oak St.
Ft. Collins, CO 80524
(970) 412-7510