

Juneteenth Celebration  
Bethel, AME – June 16, 2024  
Bishop Kurt Kusserow  
Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

The grace and peace of our Lord Jesus be with you all. Thank you for the kind invitation to come and preach among you on this joyful day. It is truly an honor.

Juneteenth is the national celebration of a very local event. On June 19, 1865, in Galveston Bay, Texas, 2,000 Union troops arrived and “announced that the more than 250,000 enslaved black people in the state were free by executive decree.”<sup>1</sup> We celebrate that day today as a day of joy for the whole nation!

And at the same time we recognize that the people in Texas whose lives were addressed by the Emancipation Proclamation waited 2 1/2 years for that presidential action to change their daily lives. It’s that experience of living between a truth that is declared

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Historical Legacy of Juneteenth*, published online by the National Museum of African American History & Culture. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/historical-legacy-juneteenth>

and the impact of that truth making a difference in our lives that I'd like to examine with you this morning.

But first, let us pray:

Lord God Almighty, Maker of all things, Savior of the world, Spirit of life and truth: we praise you that heaven and earth are full of your glory, and that in the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus the power of sin has been destroyed forever, and that on the Day of Pentecost your Spirit was poured out on all nations. Come, be among us today, that our lives may be changed by your holy and gracious presence. We pray this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

It's that experience of living between a truth that is declared and the impact of that truth making a difference in our lives that I'd like to dwell on with you this morning. I'll call it a Galveston Bay moment, for short. And by that I mean to acknowledge three very specific things: 1. The Emancipation Proclamation was a real thing that had real power to change the lives of real people in a profoundly positive way. And, 2. Significant obstacles kept the people of Texas from experiencing that truth in their daily lives. And, 3. June 19, 1865 was a real day, in an actual place, in which those obstacles to truth were overcome.

Let me try to shorten that up a bit. What I mean to identify as a Galveston Bay moment is when obstacles to truth are overcome in a physical time and place. Moments like this happen often, I believe, in large and small settings. And whenever they happen, the world is changed for the better.

Here's an example. Today is a celebration of Juneteenth. Today is also a Sunday. And in the Church, every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus.

That first Easter, when the women went to the tomb and found the stone rolled away and heard the angelic announcement that Jesus had been raised, that truth was a real thing that had real power to change the lives of real people in profoundly positive ways. And yet that truth was hampered by obstacles that kept people from experiencing its joy in their daily lives.

Doubt was one obstacle, as we learn in the Gospel of St. Luke. When the women told these things to the disciples, they considered it an idle tale. Fear was another obstacle, as we learn in the Gospel of St. Mark, where we read that the women said nothing to anyone

because they were afraid. Confusion was another obstacle to the truth of Jesus' resurrection changing the daily lives of people as we learn in the Gospel of St. John, when Mary Magdalene supposed that Jesus was the gardener.

But that impasse, that gap between the truth and people living in the joy of that truth, was overcome in specific places in real time. In Luke, Jesus accompanies the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and when they rush back to Jerusalem to share the news, they hear that he also has appeared to Peter. In John, Jesus calls out Mary's name, and her confusion is overcome.

It's that moment of connecting a living truth with the lives of real people that I'm calling a Galveston Bay moment. And I see a moment like that in the story of Zacchaeus: a Galveston Bay moment from long ago in the city of Jericho that speaks into our daily lives here and now in the city of Pittsburgh.

You know how the story unfolds. Jesus is passing through Jericho, and Zacchaeus wants to see him, but he can't get a good view, so he climbs a tree. And as it turns out, Jesus wants to see

Zacchaeus every bit as much as the other way around, because Jesus stops and looks up into the tree and says, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I *must* stay at *your* house today.”

That word, “must,” in the Greek is a very small word, but it carries a very heavy burden. Whenever it is used in the Gospels it indicates a divine necessity, as if all of heaven and earth depend on this to take place. “I *must* stay at *your* house today,” Jesus says.

So they go to Zacchaeus’ house, and people grumble, which is a sign that Jesus is doing something to change the world. I think both in Holy Scripture and in our daily lives, when comfortable people get uncomfortable enough to grumble, we should look to see what God is doing to change the world!

Now we don’t know exactly when it was that Zacchaeus opened his mouth to speak that day – when Jesus first arrived or after he had stayed the day – but in that critical moment Zacchaeus said, “Half my possessions I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” And Jesus said in reply, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

How is this a Galveston Bay moment? It certainly has that feel, that an obstacle has been overcome, that the truth has touched the daily lives of real people in a specific time and place. But what obstacles, exactly, were overcome? And what truth, exactly, broke through?

We find an answer, I think, in paying close attention to Jesus' words. Jesus did not say, "Today salvation has arrived for the poor and all those who were defrauded by this sinner." He might have said that. It would have made sense for him to say that. Surely the result of Zacchaeus' sudden benevolence did make a difference in the lives of people he had previously wronged.

But no, Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to *this* house." And then he explains his declaration by saying, "because he too is a son of Abraham."

Looking back into this story from the perspective of our life in this time and in this city, what I see as a Galveston Bay moment in the story Zacchaeus is a story of systemic change. As a chief tax collector in the time of Jesus, Zacchaeus was the human face of

systemic injustice. His practice of defrauding individuals in the course of collecting taxes from them for the Roman Empire was always more than a personal, individual wrong. The very nature of his office was built around a place where systems of injustice burdened the daily lives of real people in a profoundly negative way.

So to the extent that his life was changed by Jesus' visit, the whole system of injustice was dismantled in equal measure. If Zacchaeus learned to see himself as part of the same family as those he habitually defrauded – all of them equally children of Abraham – then a new system of mutual respect was being built. His office suddenly became a place that harbored a genuine care for the poor. His office took up the work of reparations. Jesus' visit to Zacchaeus resulted in systemic changes for that whole community.

In the language of St. Luke, the Galveston Bay moment that took place in Zacchaeus' house that day was a call to restore family relationships among all the children of Abraham. Or, as we might say in the language of our time, to regard all the residents of that community as equally valuable, equally deserving of respect and

peace, safety and justice, economic opportunity, quality education, housing and health care.

The truth is that every resident of *our* community, the city of Pittsburgh and its surrounding neighborhoods, is equally worthy of all these things. And the truth is that obstacles remain in place that keep this truth from being the lived experience for many of us. Those obstacles include systemic racism, the ideology of white supremacy, an economic system that makes a few tremendously rich at the expense of many, and a misunderstanding of freedom.

And so we pray today for a Galveston Bay moment in the city of Pittsburgh – that in our community, among our people, the truth that is a real thing that has real power to change the lives of real people in a profoundly positive way may overcome real obstacles in actual places among us, and in this moment in time.

Let's go back to the small detail in the story of Zacchaeus that is often overlooked. Jesus said, "I *must* stay at *your* house today." This tells me that Jesus is eager to address systemic injustice at its source. It is essential to his mission. "I must do this," he says, and



so he enters the house of Zacchaeus, not only to provide relief and support to a few people as he passed through Jericho that day, but to accomplish systemic change.

Do you see how this prefigures the resurrection? Do you see how Jesus' visit to Zacchaeus that day points to his essential work of redeeming all things? The restorative salvation that is Jesus' essential work is to address the problem of sin and death *at its source*. Our faith teaches us that by his death and burial, Jesus entered the house of death itself to break its grip and bring life to the whole world.

We rejoice in this truth. Each of us has had Galveston Bay moments at specific times and places in our lives in which the truth of Jesus' salvation broke through the obstacles we were facing at the time and brought the joy of salvation into our daily lives. Thanks be to God!

In this same spirit, as we gather here today, together, in Bethel Church, for the celebration of Juneteenth, we pray for a Galveston Bay moment for our city, for our neighbors, for our

family and friends. And perhaps most especially for those who occupy the offices of systemic injustice in our time and place; that Jesus himself, through our earnest prayers and through our diligent work to dismantle systemic injustice, may come and visit them as once he visited Zacchaeus!

Amen.