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Negro Spirituals Royalties Project
Exodus 14

If you don't know the story, let me tell you what Juneteenth is all about. Let me first acknowledge that there are different versions of this story, and differing accounts of how and when exactly it happened. But like most every myth it is grounded in some historical fact and it serves to communicate some enduring truth. On June 19th, 1865 Union Army General Gordon Granger announced the emancipation of enslaved people in Galveston, Texas. This was nearly two-and-a-half years after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which had been ignored in the southern states, including Texas. Granger's proclamation in Galveston also came more than two months after Robert E. Lee surrendered his army at Appomattox Courthouse. The war was indisputably over. Slavery had been formally abolished. But word traveled slowly throughout the southern states and territories that enslaved people were considered free. Slaveholding southerners continued to suppress the news of their defeat. And even after it was generally understood that the system of slavery had legally ended, white terrorists continued to wage physical and psychological violence to prevent African Americans from changing their circumstances.

A good source to read more about the story of Juneteenth is Clint Smith's book published last year, *How the Word is Passed*. I want to start with the story of Juneteenth today because - today is Juneteenth and the church should celebrate the day of African American independence from white slaveholders no less than the Fourth of July represents the freedom of white colonists from the King of England. But it's also true that there is scarlet thread running through everything we are doing today: celebrating the Juneteenth holiday, offering "royalties" for Negro spirituals, and reading from the book of Exodus. What holds all of these gestures together is the faith of Black people in the liberating presence of God in the human condition. The Exodus story is the deliverance of God's people from Egypt's slaveholding Pharaoh. The passage of Israel through the parted waters of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharaoh's army as a sign of God's judgment is a defining passage in the Christian experience of enslaved Africans. As a genre, the spirituals themselves reflect the musical capacities of communities held in captivity using the Christian scriptures they have been taught by their enslavers as a subversive testimony to God's promise of liberation.

It may be worth asking, then, what business does our church have singing the music of those held in captivity by whiteness? The racial privilege of our community puts us in the position of Pharaoh more than the place of Israel in the Exodus story. To put it more plainly, Negro spirituals do not belong to us. They are not native to the white experience. To these criticisms we might offer much of what we have learned through years of our congregation's prayerful study of racial justice and organizing for racial equity. We come together and sing the

Negro spirituals first as an act of confession. We acknowledge that this music is convicting of our privilege; this music stands in judgment of our whiteness. When we sing *Go Down, Moses*, we remember that our whiteness puts us in the position of Pharaoh. “Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said: Let my people Go!” God is speaking to us. We hear God’s judgment of the sins of our slaveholding ancestors. And we reflect, too, on the privilege that we hold by virtue of our belonging to communities that empower witness over all communities of color. So when we sing the spirituals, we are not imposters. We might say, in the words of the Apostle Paul, we are singing God’s judgment upon ourselves. We do this so that our hearts may be turned toward the liberation promised in the biblical narrative.

Because we are standing first in confession, we have been looking for ways to enact our sorrow about the suffering we have participated in and our commitment to the flourishing of all God’s children. And that brings us to the small things we can do and say to participate in the liberation recorded in the story. The Negro Spirituals Royalties Project is one way that white congregation can acknowledge the contributions that the music of enslaved people has made to our own spiritual enrichment.

What exactly are Negro spirituals? A precise definition is hard to come by. Negro spirituals are certainly distinct from what many recognize as gospel music or concert music. Negro spirituals fit under the canopy of what we know generally as slave songs, that is, the music original to enslaved people developed under the conditions of the plantation system. Says James Weldon Johnson, “The Spirituals are purely and solely the creation of the American Negro” who “brought with him from Africa his native musical instinct and talent.” There are multiple genres of slave songs that we might identify. Andre Thomas, in his book, *Way Over in Beulah Lan*’ ’ mentions such categories as field hollers, tunes carried for sharing information and announcements through the workday, and ring shouts, a call and response form common with dancing. What we know as Negro spirituals consist of music developed in camp meetings and brush arbors as enslaved Africans used their own musical gifts to interpret for themselves the Christian scriptures they were introduced to in captivity. Thomas explains, “it is the interaction and synthesis of the two cultures – the African culture with that of white southerners” and “a fusing of the spirit of Christianity with the slaves’ African music” that contributed to the development of a distinctive style of music for worship and spiritual growth.

This musical tradition has been further cultivated and developed as the songs have been preserved in written notes. The greatest contribution toward our own understanding and use of the Negro spirituals came when the Fisk Jubilee singers took concert versions of this music on tour, popularizing it in major American cities and in Europe. For us to reflect on offering “royalties” for this music is to acknowledge that the creators of this art form never benefited from it in a material way, and for us to show our own value of this work and our gratitude for it. It would go too far for us to say that this is a form of “reparations” for slavery. But it is true that we have been looking for ways to place monetary value on those goods that have been taken by whites from Black communities. This royalties project is one way - not for us to make

reparations - but for us to take action in light of our confession, make an offering in gratitude, and contribute to the flourishing of Black communities who are our neighbors today.

We do all of this in light of the Gospel that proclaims the liberation of all people. Juneteenth is significant because there are so many points in African American history when freedom was denied. We embrace this story - the historical truth as well as the mystery - because it marks a point in time for us to celebrate emancipation. We sing the spirituals because they help to ground our faith in God who stands in judgment of oppression and who promises deliverance to all held in captivity.

Singing these songs is an act of faith in God's message through Moses: Let my people go. Remembering Juneteenth, likewise. "All slaves are free," General Granger is said to have proclaimed when he arrived in Galveston. Jesus said something similar when he first got to Nazareth. "I have come to proclaim release to the captives."