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Tabernacle Baptist Church Coatesville, PA

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What to the Black Millennial is Juneteenth?



Growing up, my schooling was largely void of the perspectives of people who looked like me, but there were three historical Black figures I could count on to hear about every year: Martin Luther King, Harriett Tubman, and Frederick Douglass.

On July 5, 1852 the last of those individuals, being the powerful abolitionist, preacher, teacher, and orator that he was, delivered a now-famous speech titled "*What to the Slave is the Fourth of July.*" In his remarks, Mr. Douglass reminded the Rochester, NY audience that not everyone had reason to celebrate the fourth of July.

Students of history know that even as Mr. Douglass was speaking slavery was still anchoring America. In fact, it would be well over a decade before the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, and even longer before true emancipation was realized.

There, 76 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Douglass delivered a stinging oration on the inconsistency of the fourth of July holiday. "*What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.*"

The victimization to which Mr. Douglass was referring was the slavery in which most Americans who looked like him were still bound. The same Declaration of Independence being celebrated had never really been intended for Black men like Douglass. It was the presence of such inconsistencies that led Douglass, a noted lay preacher, to deliver what was effectively a sermon highlighting the undercurrent of hypocrisy overshadowing the whole gathering.

A little less than 13 years later, after years of kicking the can of slavery down the road, and ultimately fighting a bloody Civil War, the word of emancipation finally reached the farthest corners of the nation--Galveston, TX. That day, June 19, 1865, is the foundation for what we now celebrate as Emancipation Day or Juneteenth.

In fact, remarkably, Texas is the state that has done the most to elevate this holiday. It was in 1938 that then-Governor of Texas James V. Allred proclaimed June 20 (the 19th fell on a Sunday) a day of observance. In 1979 Texas made Juneteenth a paid state holiday. In the years since, every single state except South Dakota has recognized Juneteenth as a day of significance.

Such recognition culminated in President Biden's June 17, 2021 signing into law of Juneteenth as a federal holiday. Certainly, recognition of the *announcement* of slavery ending is a good thing, of that there should be no question.

The problem is, too often America leans heavy on announcement at the expense of true *atonement*. Even as millions of Black Millennials prepare to, in various ways, partake of celebratory festivities, there remains the evil presence of unhealed wounds and new streams of bigotry that run counter to everything the original Juneteenth proclaimed.

- It is hard to celebrate the declaration of freedom when student loan debt disproportionately ensnares the finances of Black Millennials.
- It's hard to commemorate physical chains falling from the last of the chattel slaves when, due to the iron grip of mass incarceration, one in four Black Millennials, and almost one in three younger Black Millennials, had an immediate family member imprisoned while they were growing up.
- Not to mention the ongoing images of police brutality,
- the under funding of schools that serve communities of color, and
- the current efforts at resisting equity-based efforts in curriculum.
- Worst of all, many of the same members of Congress that helped make Juneteenth a federal holiday continue to resist efforts at securing voting rights for the historically marginalized and disenfranchised people of our Republic.

In his day, Frederick Douglass was simply asking for consistency. He wasn't saying that the fourth of July was a bad day, but rather challenging America to ensure that all its citizens had cause to celebrate.

In the same manner, this Black Millennial would never say that Juneteenth is a bad thing, but that a better thing would be a day in which the descendants of the freed slaves could observe freedom from all forms of slavery.

- What if we could announce that mass incarceration no longer tore apart Black communities?
- What if we could proclaim from the hills that our schools received fair funding and that zip codes serving people of color didn't by default have less sufficient public schools?
- What if Black Millennials could joyfully get behind the wheels of their vehicles and trust that there wasn't a greater chance of them being pulled over by law enforcement than their White peers?

Until such a day that those conditions represent reality, we continue on.

Celebrate Juneteenth!

- Do so by patronizing Black-owned businesses.
- Do so by gathering in community and telling the story of the resilient people who overcame centuries of subjugation.
- Gather children and allow them to experience the pride and richness of their cultural heritage.

Celebrate Juneteenth! Just make sure you do so, recognizing that we still have far to go. ###