

Psalm 42:1-8 & Romans 14:5-6

“Observing the Day”

The Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Father’s Day & Juneteenth Sunday, June 19, 2022

The Readings:

Psalm 42:1-8

Leader: ¹ *As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.*

² *My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.*

People: *When shall I come and behold
the face of God?*

³ *My tears have been my food
day and night,
while people say to me continually,
‘Where is your God?’*

Leader: ⁴ *These things I remember,
as I pour out my soul:
how I went with the throng,
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,
a multitude keeping festival.*

People: ⁵ *Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my help ⁶ and my God.*

Leader: *My soul is cast down within me;
therefore I remember you
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,
from Mount Mizar.*

People: ⁷ *Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts;
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.*

All: ⁸ *By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.*

Romans 14:5-6

⁵ *Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike.
Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶ Those who observe the day, observe it in*

honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

This past week, my husband, Steve, and I observed a special day. Thursday, June 16, was our 44th wedding anniversary!

Across those years, we have also been in pastoral ministry, and it has rarely been possible to celebrate on the actual date. So this year, we decided to reserve the evening and go out to dinner. I had also intended that my first words in the morning to him would be: “Happy Anniversary!” but he beat me to it.

There are many good ways to observe special days and holidays. Birthday cakes and singing. Watching the ball drop on New Year’s Eve. Trips to the cemetery on Memorial Day. Whether it be as benign as National Donut Day or as crucial as Gun Violence Awareness Day, whether its Christmas, Easter, or the lesser-known Reformation Day, you and I choose how we will mark them.

This weekend, I imagine people asking themselves: “Will I do a phone call, or a card, or try to BBQ for Father’s Day? Maybe a gift, or a donation to a cause he cares about?” If your father has passed, the observation of the day obviously takes on a different quality. Also, if there is tension within your relationship with him or pain attached to it, the best thing to do this year may be to sit in silence, or do something kind, to ‘father’ yourself.

People are observing Juneteenth in various ways too. A few have told me that they plan to attend or volunteer at festivals, or gather as families. Others may do community service, or advocate for justice, such as Voter Rights. I’m opting for educational webinars, one last Friday and one this Monday. And what a list of events and resources there are on our bulletin insert!

At the same time, Juneteenth provokes reservations and hesitations. For example, Dr. Rene K. Harrison warned us Friday against taking the single narrative about what happened on June 19, 1865 – the one that you find all over Google that uses almost exactly the same language – as the *whole* story. Rather, she says, we must look for the “hidden stories.”¹ Bishop William Barber, an instrumental leader in yesterday’s Poor People’s Moral March on Washington, reflected: “[In 1865, the people], being lied to for two years, no reparations and no voting rights, and now, that we are *still* in bondage to racism, I’m not sure that we call Juneteenth ‘a celebration!’”²

This dilemma about how best to observe the day **connects to the reading from Paul’s letter to the church in Rome**. Church leaders there were confused about which holidays to celebrate and how to mark special days. There were Jewish Christians who were very tied to those holy days laid out in the Torah. There were converted pagans who were trying to know which special days to adopt and which to give up. Both groups were trying to translate what Jesus Christ would want of them into their lives in Rome, a superstitious place, preoccupied by power, weapons, and colonialism.

¹Dr. Rene K. Harrison, Historian and Host for the UCC podcast for Juneteenth, “Revealing Hidden Histories,” Friday, June 17, 2022.

²Bishop William J. Barber II, Repairers of the Breach, “A Juneteenth Charge,” 2021 sermon in Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

Paul goes for diversity and understanding. In effect, he writes: “You must follow your own conscience and then act generously and respectfully to one another.” Paul lands on **the faith principle: “If you observe the day *in honor of the Lord*, you will do well.”**

Thank you, Paul. This sounds good, but I find your injunction still a bit vague. Beyond all the other good things we can do to observe special days, ***how do we practice this kind of honoring?***

I found help in Psalm 42. When the Psalm writer was unable to go to the Temple for whatever reason and practice the festivals and the rhythms of her religion, and due to whatever was happening in her life, she was no longer sure how to navigate in the world as it was! This is the context of her psalm prayer. **The Psalmist had to learn to mark every day elsewhere, and she practiced longing and remembrance.**

Longing and remembering. **Longing for God and what God wants the world to be** – is longing like a deer for flowing streams, like the thirsty in a desert for the living God! Then the Psalmist remembers back to the times she led the procession of singing worshippers up to the glorious place of worship – **remembering the occasions when she had touched God and tasted of God’s just peace!**

Longing and remembering. You and I can do *this*. **The practice of longing and remembering honors the Divine; it brings out the Holy in the observation of our holidays.**

I noticed these two practices were part of the UCC Juneteenth service that I attended online. The planners quoted Opal Lee, the retired schoolteacher who worked tirelessly over forty years to press Congress to make Juneteenth a federal holiday: “Juneteenth means freedom for everybody, and none of us are free unless *all* are free.” And throughout the event, storytellers named and remembered their ancestors aloud: “We remember our ancestors – our fathers and mothers; we remember what it feels like to be free.”

What might our Open and Affirming Sunday gain from longing and remembering? How could our nation become better by longing and remembering?

I don’t know if it is the same for you, but after many years together, it’s funny, but we had trouble finding things to talk about across the table from each other Thursday night. *After* our anniversary dinner, having worked more on the sermon, I thought of how Steve’s and my conversation would have been enhanced had we talked about our longing for what God wants for us *and* remembered the moments across those forty-four years when we had tasted and touched this holy gift together. I think this would have been observing the day in honor of the Lord!