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Celebrating Juneteenth at Harding

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HARDING AND CIVIL RIGHTS: CELEBRATING JUNETEENTH AT HARDING

By Dr. Jason Darden

Freedom is an interesting subject of discussion. When this word freedom is mentioned, what comes to mind? As Americans, most people naturally think of our independence from the oppressive rule of the British monarchy. We think of the conflicts we endured for the sake of democracy. We think of the countless lives lost for the sake of our sovereignty. As Christians, most of us think about emancipation from the bondage of sin and death. We have been set from the rule of Satan's dominion and brought into the kingdom of God's glorious light. However, as Christian Americans that were born with more melanin in their skin, the idea of freedom is more complex. Black American Christians view freedom through another set of lenses. Though America gained her independence from Britain, Blacks were still in Slavery. Fredrick Douglass encompassed this idea best when he stated:

What to the slave is the fourth of July? I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us.

Sadly, this distance is still present today. Although many improvements have been made, there is still a great disparity between the White Anglo Saxon Protestant and the African American diaspora. Our upbringing either shields us from this reality or provides us with a front row seat to the injustice. Many will say, slavery and racial discrimination is a thing of the past. They say, in America you can be whatever you want to be through hard work and dedication. Yet, they fail to realize that trauma is very hard to overcome. That's what slavery and racial discrimination did to Black Americans: it traumatized us. As a 40-year-old Black man, I still listen to stories from my 87-year-old grandfather on how he was treated. These stories have been seared into my hippocampus and will never leave me. They impact how I view people. You should never tell a soldier dealing with PTSD to just get over it and

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move on. However, this is the prevailing message today. Slavery and discrimination is done with, *now get over it*.

However, the racial unrest during the summer of 2020 communicated to the world that Black Americans still experience injustice and trauma. During this time, many of my White Christians friends wrote me kind messages stating, “Jason, your life matters.” Although I was honored to receive a kind word, I felt more action was in order. So, I began to kick around some ideas with my colleagues at Harding. We had a meeting with some faculty, staff and administration to discuss how the Harding community should respond to the racial unrest in America. I happened to bring up Juneteenth during the meeting. I was surprised to learn that many at Harding did not know what Juneteenth was. This was the perfect opportunity to educate many in the Harding community about our beautiful Black culture. That evening we started planning the event. I held a special zoom meeting with a few influential African Americans on campus and asked them to participate. We planned on holding a Juneteenth vigil at the fountain in front of the McInteer Bible building. We only planned for about 25 to attend because most we were gone for the summer break. However, when the word got out about Juneteenth, we quickly realized it was going to be way bigger than expected. On the evening of the Juneteenth vigil, the front lawn was packed with more people than we could count. In addition to the front lawn, over one thousand people logged on to our Facebook livestream.

An historic moment at Harding, indeed it was. It was historic for several reasons. First, the time was right. During the summer of 2020 our country was experiencing a lot of racial tension. Juneteenth was a moment of solidarity and love; and provided a respite from hatred and bigotry. Secondly, it was educational. The Harding community at large was unaware of the history of Juneteenth. We presented them with an opportunity to learn more about Black history. Third, it provided the Harding community an opportunity to get in front of racial issues rather than playing from behind. Proactive loving Christians in the Harding community came together in place to show solidarity, learn black history, to mourn and to celebrate how far we’ve come. During the event, the Harding community realized that we have a long way to go and that the church must take the lead in facilitating justice for all. It was a great evening at Harding and one that I will never forget. I am so proud to be a bison.