

## “Faith Seeking Understanding”

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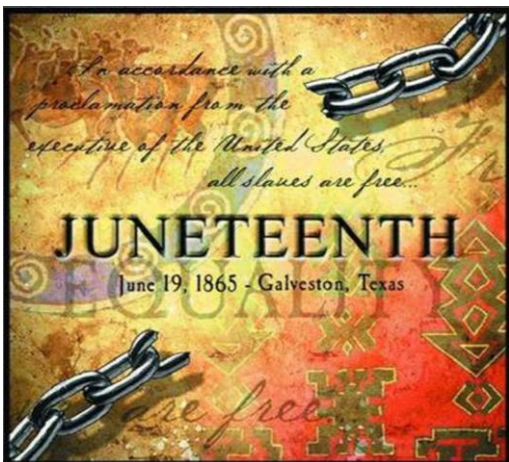
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Meditation on Matthew 21:16-19, 25-30

**J**uneteenth. Ever celebrated it? It is a holiday which commemorates the ending of slavery in the United States. Celebrated in thirty eight states and the District of Columbia, it is known as Emancipation Day or Freedom Day as well. The origin of the celebration dates to June 19<sup>th</sup> 1865 when General Gordon Granger announced the freeing of the slaves from the balcony of the Ashton Villa in Galveston Texas.



JUNETEENTH



There is something rather odd about a commemoration on the anniversary of June 19<sup>th</sup> 1865. It is a significant date alright – certainly for Texans, but there are more significant dates on the road to freedom for the slaves. Lincoln had issued the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1862, why not a commemoration of that date? Lincoln’s executive order had taken effect January 1<sup>st</sup> 1863 – that would seem

another good date to remember.

When General Granger stepped out on that balcony, the slaves had already been free two years, six months and nineteen days. What’s the deal? The Civil War itself had been over since April and Lincoln was dead and buried too. It a mystery why that particular



date of June 19<sup>th</sup> has such significance for Americans?

Ah, but this mystery is also a good parable of our coming to faith. Faith is like Juneteenth. The victory was won long before. We in our ignorance have continued life as usual until we suddenly with jubilation realize that we are free – we are already free – we have in fact been free all along. The action which freed us from slavery has happened twenty centuries ago – “on a hill far away,” as we are wont to sing.

Each of us continues to commemorate not only the day of victory, the day of resurrection on that Sunday morning so long ago, but we also commemorate the date and time we came out of our ignorance and realized it.

**O**ur text today comes at this another way ~ our text surprisingly tells us this is in how God intends it.

**“Father, Lord of heaven and earth....you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.”**

There are lots of great strands we could pull out from our texts today, but this morning we are going to concentrate on understanding just this one verse. This would seem to be one of the strongest statements Jesus ever made against wisdom and intelligence. It could be the perfect proof-text for an anti-intellectual side of Christianity which denies the mind its just due. However that is not Jesus’ point at all.



Let’s look carefully at what Jesus does say. This oft repeated theme in Jesus’ teaching is also commonly misunderstood = that children have a special place in God’s family:

**“Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.”** [Matthew 19:14]

**“Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” [Matthew 18:4]**

The word ‘humble’ here is not just our modern Christian idea of humility before God, but it even more means ‘humble’ in the sense of ‘humble origins,’ meaning deprived, weak and low. In Jesus day, children were the outcasts at the very, very bottom of the status system and seen as worthless – that’s right, they were considered worthless. Don’t be surprised. They were outside the economic system and consequently were dependencies and liabilities – yet another mouth to feed, until at an early age they could be put to work. Don’t read the high value we place on our children into Jesus’ day. In that day, children were as ‘humble’ as one could get in the real social sense. That is precisely what Jesus wishes for us to understand.

What Jesus is saying is this: children have no pretenses about abilities, accomplishments and strengths. Children have no illusions about who they are. Children have no pretenses about being wise or intelligent. Children just are, in the moment, living and being. That is how God wishes us to come into the story.

There is a phrase that may prove helpful: ***“faith seeking understanding.”*** St. Anselm in the 11<sup>th</sup> century coined the phrase, yet it is very popular today.

***“Faith seeking understanding”*** works precisely as written ~ the arrow of action is from faith to understanding, but it doesn’t work the other way around. This means we cannot reach God through our minds alone, through pure intellectual pursuits, attempting to prove that God exists. You cannot do it. So true” **“you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent,”** as Jesus says.



**I** tried to reach God that way. In recent correspondence with a friend, I describe my intellectual attempts to “prove God exists” in college as:

“me running away from God by searching and switching majors and God kept closing each door. A bad intro course here, a tyrannical professor there and I ended up discovering I really loved the "scientific study" of religions. I was bound and determined not to be a "practitioner" of any religion but merely a scientific observer. Still resisting God = like Jacob my namesake, still wrestling with God.

But even as I "studied" religions as an "outsider," I gradually got my questions answered (mostly with answers about the irrational and paradoxical nature of faith), and slowly and imperceptibly, without answering any questions, God took my searching for answers and turned it into a leap of faith. I was looking for proof of God and discovered that none exists ~ and to my complete surprise, that quite illogically led to actual faith?!”



**I've proven one thing!** Not that we can prove or disprove that God exists, but rather I've proven that we cannot reach God by engaging the process with our intelligence alone. However, that emphatically does not mean that we throw intelligence out of the process. In point of fact, we must come to God with hands empty; with no presumption of our abilities; no works to show; not thinking we in any way deserve something from God; not thinking that we in any way have earned anything from God; not making any claims on God based on ourselves; like children we must come, humble in the deepest sense.

Then totally open, totally vulnerable to God, God can bring us into the plan. God can gift us with faith, can grant us understanding – can give each the eyes to see that the victory has already happened and the story is already unfolding and it has always been there and like Juneteenth we just didn't know it. All that is left is to pick up our



part in God's story. *"Get on board little children/Get on board little children/Get on board little children/Fare thee well/Fare thee well."*

**W**e must not fall into a bias against our God-given minds. We must not submit to a yoke of anti-intellectualism. God gave us minds and God expects us to use them. Faith is indeed a gift from God, but once the seed of faith is placed in our hearts; our minds are there to form it, mold it and complete it. Without our intelligence engaged, our faith would remain infantile; it would not grow into mature faith and a life-time commitment.

Faith and minds in balance; each in their proper place ~ and heart and experience of the LORD added into the mix. All are critical in the journey to spiritual maturity.

*"Faith seeking understanding"* indeed! And AMEN.