

The Last Link in the Last Chain

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EXCERPT

Emma Lazarus was a Jewish poet and activist who wrote the famous poem engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty—“give me your tired, your poor/Your huddled masses yearning to be free”—and it’s the poem for which she is best known. But 50 years before she penned those verses, she wrote another poetic line, one that others have adopted in different forms and at different times but which I believe speaks just loudly to us today as it did when she scribbled it down in 1833: “Until we are all free, we are none of us free.”

Of course, Dr. King adapted that phrase into “No one is free until we are all free”. But the truth that statement acknowledges is, I believe, the same truth that is acknowledged by Mayor Hogsett’s and the Indianapolis City-County Council’s decision—and now by the federal government’s decision—to recognize Juneteenth as a holiday,

And I want to be clear that I’m using the term “holiday” in the oldest sense of the term: “holy day.” We are not recognizing Juneteenth so that everyone gets another day off. We recognize it as a “holy day,” a day that is genuinely sacred. A day that marks a turning point in the history of this nation, and, ultimately, the entire world. We mark it as a “holy day” every bit

as worthy of that recognition and remembrance as any other holiday in the American cultural calendar.

Personally, I would argue it's more worthy of that recognition. What day should be more celebrated than the last "official" day of the practice of slavery in this country? What day is more holy or deserving of recognition than the day on which the last link in the last chain that bound the last legally enslaved human being in this country was broken? If Emma Lazarus and Dr. King were correct, Juneteenth is the day when everyone in this country was freed from the sickness that was slavery.

I believe broad recognition of Juneteenth is the beginning of broad recognition of that fact, that the United States was not, in fact, "the land of the free" until June 19, 1865. Or, I should say, the United States did not truly begin becoming "the land of the free" until that date. 156 years later, we're still working on it; still working on and wrestling with becoming a nation where we are all equally free. The legacies of slavery and white supremacy keep us—not some of us, all of us—shackled in chains that are no less binding simply because they're not seen. Their impact is manifestly evident everywhere we look.

And that's why I'm so happy to be with you today, to not only recognize Juneteenth but to celebrate the launch of the National Center on Racial Equity and Inclusion here at Martin University. At every level, in every sector of our society, organizations need to build their capacity to eliminate racial inequities and dismantle systemic racism. Our community and our country need the kind of change the National Center will help drive. Frankly, the commitments Martin University has made to achieving inclusive excellence, racial equity, social justice, and

access and opportunities for all are goals to which we all should be committed. I am. The City-County Council is. Chief Taylor is. You are.

In fact, I believe the more committed we are to this change, the more closely bound we are to achieving these goals, the more free we become. Not some of us, all of us. And you know why? Because we are none of us free until we are all of us free.

Thank you.