

It was a cold afternoon in the woods in Norfolk Connecticut. It was easy to hear the soft thud, thud, thud of horses hooves through the trees. James could hear men shouting occasionally, “Any sign of em?”, and he could hear the voice of his master, The Rev. Thompson among them, “No, not over this way”. Little James Mars held his breath and tried to make himself even smaller in the nest of leaves that he had made for himself. Peeking out carefully he tried to see if he could spot where his brother and parents were hiding. He shifted his weight slightly and then....crack....a twig broke under his shoulder. “O Lord God please may they not find me”, prayed James Mars. The year was 1798 . James was 8 years old and was hiding in the woods in Norfolk, CT praying that the man he ran away from wouldn’t recapture him and his family. They stayed there in the woods for several days before they were taken to a barn by abolitionist friends in Norfolk.

You see, the Mars family were slaves. After a season-long shell game of moving the slave family from home to home, the Mars family ended up back at the home in Canaan of Parson Thompson. James was then sold, at the age of eight, to Mr. Munger, while his brother was sold to another family nearby. Connecticut law at that time (1798) allowed that one could own a slave until that slave reached age 25 and then they must have their freedom.¹

James did not think much of Parson Thompson and, much later, when he wrote his autobiography he said that he wondered if the minister had ever read the scripture in the Acts of the Apostles which says “God made of one blood all the nations of men for to dwell on the face of the earth.” (17:26)²

To support his belief that slavery was right and God-given Parson Thompson would have pointed to Scripture as well, I’m sorry to say. There are hundreds of passages that, taken literally, could be seen to endorse slavery. Laws in Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy tell

¹ Frederick Calvin Norton, “Negro Slavery in CT”, *Connecticut Magazine*, <<http://history.rays-place.com/slavery.htm>> pg. 9.

² James Mars, *Life of James Mars*, <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/mars/mars.html>>pg. 19

the Hebrew people how to care for their slaves. Physical violence to slaves could have been justified by the proverb, “a pampered slave will come to a bad end.” How awful.

Jesus told parables about slaves – the parable of the wicked slaves who threw the son of the owner out of the vineyard and killed him. The story of the good and trustworthy slaves in the parable of the talents. Taken in one way Jesus himself seems to condone slavery. But how wrong that is. It was just that it was a common institution of that time. The people to whom Jesus told his stories would have been able to identify with a story about slaves.

St. Paul too, refers to slavery, not as a horrible condition, but one that should be accepted: “In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, slave or free, there remain with God”(1 Cor 7:24). You can see how literalists could find plenty to support slavery in Biblical texts.

Slavery in Connecticut was alive and well (I don’t know that “well” is the right term to use) in the 18th century. Population figures show that in 1715 there were 1500 slaves in CT. By the time of the Revolutionary War there were 6500 slaves in CT.³ It was decided that slaves, “if they were of good life and conversation, and adjudged by the selectmen to be suitable persons for the army could be put into service and their masters freed from future support of them.”⁴ What a sad circumstance, that Africans, brought here against their will, were able to be freed by fighting in a war that was not their own doing or responsibility.

But the wheels of justice did turn steadily if slowly. By the 1830 census there were only 25 slaves in ownership. The tide had turned by that time and people had finally come to realize, at least here in the northern states, that owning another person was immoral and sinful. Finally, in 1848 slavery was abolished in this state forever.

³ Fergus Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*, Amistad. 2005. pg. 16.

⁴ Frederick C. Norton, “Negro Slavery in Connecticut”, Connecticut Magazine, Vol 5. No. 6, June 1899.
<<http://history.rays-place.com/slavery.htm>>

Unfortunately, the Episcopal Church cannot say that it was blameless in all of this. We were one of the Christian denominations that did not split at the time of the Civil War. The Baptists split into Southern and American Baptists. The Methodists split into the Methodist Episcopal Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church or AME Zion. Why did we not split? One reason is because we did not take a firm stand against slavery. Here is a case where our desire to maintain that big tent of belief within the Church did not serve us well. The church abhorred schism above all else and so we avoided an official stand on human bondage.⁵

Anglicans are good at compromise and, unfortunately many Episcopalians benefitted economically from slavery and did not really want to see it go – particularly in the Southern States. But there were some bright lights shining forth from this gloomy picture. There were a number of northern clergymen who were vocal about their support of the abolition of slavery. One of the most well known is Phillips Brooks of Trinity Boston.

The Episcopal Church now repents of its complicity in the slave trade in our country and our involvement and silence in the face of what was taking place to good and faithful people.

Resolved, That the 75th General Convention of The Episcopal Church declare unequivocally that the institution of slavery in the United States and anywhere else in the world, based as it is on “ownership” of some persons by other persons, was and is a sin and a fundamental betrayal of the humanity of all persons who were involved, a sin that continues to plague our common life in the Church and our culture; and be it further

Resolved, That The Episcopal Church acknowledge its history of participation in this sin and the deep and lasting injury which the institution of slavery and its aftermath have inflicted on society and on the Church; and be it further

Resolved, That we express our most profound regret that (a) The Episcopal Church lent the institution of slavery its support and justification based on Scripture, and (b) after slavery was formally abolished, The Episcopal Church continued for at least a century to support de jure and de facto segregation and discrimination; and be it further

Resolved, That The Episcopal Church apologize for its complicity in and the injury done by the institution of slavery and its aftermath; we repent of this sin and ask God’s grace and forgiveness; 6

⁵ David L. Holmes, A Brief History of the Episcopal Church, (Harrisburg, PA:Trinity Press Intl., 1993), 80-81.

⁶ “The Acts of Convention”, www.episcopal archives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2006.

am also sorry to say that I see racially motivated behavior still taking place today. Slavery may be over, but racism, it's ugly child, is still with us. I was sorry to see that our school district here in Northwest CT was one of the ones that did not broadcast President Obama's message live to school children on September 8th. It leaves me wondering if a message from a white President would have been given the same treatment.

You and I may not have lived in the time of slavery. The 19th century was a long time ago. You and I may not think that we have benefited personally or directly from slavery, but we all still bear the stain of this on our society, and our church. **We have** benefitted **indirectly** from all the work of slaves in our state and for members and clergy of our church.

All of the Episcopal clergy participate in a pension system begun by one who benefitted from slavery. Most of us put our money in banks that have historical ties to slavery. And we may not realize it, but we all use steel made in mills that at one time had a connection to slave-driven mines in the South.⁷ Today we have the opportunity to acknowledge what has gone before, to the best of our ability, and do our best to make sure that we **do not** quietly allow racism and bigotry to continue **in any form, to any people.**

Jesus finds his disciples in our passage this morning arguing, but the disciples are not willing to tell Jesus what they were arguing about. But he knew – they were arguing about who was the greatest. They knew it was wrong, and arrogant, but they couldn't help themselves. They were human as are we. Jesus is constantly trying to teach them humility, and it is not an easy lesson to learn, for any of us.

Jesus uses the example of the child – this passage is found in all four Gospels – Jesus tells us that we should be a respectful and understanding of a child as we are of anyone else. Children in that day and age were not treated as children are now. They were overworked and

⁷ Katharine Jefferts Schori, "Sermon: Service of Repentance", St. Thomas Church, Philadelphia, 2008, p.7.

treated roughly. The beautiful window in the rear of this church to the left illustrates this Biblical passage.

We know that God created us out of love and for love. We know that what is really important in this life is to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly in God's presence as the prophet Micah has told us.

Thanks be to God our church is making a sincere effort to work together in mutual respect, each one for every other one. Trinity's mission statement says it "To be a companion on The Way." We are not fashioned by God to go it alone and be rugged individualists uncaring about what happens to others. We are made by God to depend on each other, to love, to heal, to forgive each other, and be a friend among friends – a worker among workers.

*"Be it further resolved that our church be committed to be a "repairer of the breach" (Isaiah 58:12) both materially and relationally, and achieve the spiritual healing and reconciliation that will lead us to a new life in Christ."*⁸

This morning's service here in this place brings together at least three very different congregations of our Episcopal church; those whose home church is here at Trinity Lime Rock, those who are choir members of Trinity Wall Street in the City, and those who are guests from St. Paul's Church in Spring Valley, NY.

This is the right time... and the right placeand the right gathering of congregations. This is the moment to recommit ourselves to patient and perseverant work towards that new life in Christ. A new life that acknowledges our shameful past, repents of it. This is the moment to pray together to God for healing and reconciliation so that we can move forward finally out of the dark past once and for all, and into the light of a new day.

The abolitionist Theodore Parker said words in 1860 that Martin Luther King, Jr. made famous in 1960; that the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice. Let's you and I

⁸ "The Acts of Convention", www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution-complete.pl?resolution=2006.

bind ourselves together today promising to do our best to hang onto that arc together and bend it just a little more towards the just and loving world that Jesus has wanted for us all along.

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