

Commemoration of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
St. Paul's on the Green, Norwalk -- January 14, 2024

On this, the Sunday closest to the 15th of January, the Episcopal Church honors the life and legacy of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. As you might imagine, over the years I have crafted *several* sermons to mark the occasion, and they are *all* pretty good, if I do say so myself. This morning, however, I am not going to say *word one* about Dr. King. Instead, I am going to focus on the *back* story, on the indelible stain on American history that gave rise to Dr. King's life and legacy.

At 3 PM this afternoon, Christ Church Cathedral in Hartford will host a diocesan-wide service marking the 175 anniversary of the abolition of slavery here in Connecticut. The commemoration will also serve as a liturgical launch for the reparations campaign that we agreed to undertake at our most recent annual convention. As a member of the planning committee for the service, and in my capacity as Interim Canon for Advocacy, Racial Justice, & Reconciliation, I have been thinking a *lot* lately about the peculiar institution of slavery. About the fact that it is the *backbone* of American history, about its enduring *legacy*, about the ways it has shaped our common life, about the ways it has shaped my *own* life.

My father was a man of few words, and also quite private. Trying to get him to talk about family history was a hopeless endeavor. There was one story, however, that daddy loved to tell. Well, it wasn't really a story; more like a *scene* from his childhood. In the scene daddy is 6 or 7 years old, and is seated across the table from his grandmother whom the children called Mammy Jane. She

always had a bible within reach, and she loved to quote it from *memory*, which she *had* to rely upon because she could not *read*. Daddy never failed to mention that Mammy Jane was *toothless*, and he *marveled* at how good she was at “gumming” her food. There is one *more* fact about Mammy Jane that Daddy made sure to get across – that she had been *enslaved* as a child. And that trusty *bible* of hers? It had seen her through trials and tribulations more challenging than any we would *ever* face.

At the Cathedral today we will commemorate the end of slavery here in Connecticut. When I count the years that have passed since abolition, the peculiar institution feels distant and remote. But when I envision my father sitting across the table from Mammy Jane, slavery is up close and personal.

When I was about the same age as my father was back then, my family moved from Cleveland, Ohio to Denver, Colorado in search of a better life. We crowded into an old black Plymouth that was packed with all our worldly possessions, as well as with provisions for the road. The trip took 3 or 4 days. Each evening we would pull into a rest station and ask for directions to “Colored Town.” Then, as now, there were motels conveniently located near most Interstate rest stops, but we knew that we would not be permitted to stay in any of them. Our only choice was to sleep in an overcrowded car, or to find our way to the nearest Black enclave, in hopes of finding someone who rented rooms to passersby.

This was in 1955. The same year as the Montgomery bus boycott, and eight years before the March on Washington. Our trek across the nation took place well after

legally-enforced slavery had morphed into legally-enforced *segregation*, and at a time when *de jure* segregation was morphing into *de facto* segregation, the kind that is reinforced by laws that are seemingly neutral. The kind of segregation that persists so long as the status quo is maintained.

A couple of years after we arrived in Denver, word spread throughout Black communities across the nation that a black child would be on television the following week. I realize it is hard to believe these days, but when I was in elementary school, *no* Black people appeared on TV on a regular basis. “No” as in “none” as in “zero”. Once in a while Sammy Davis, Jr., or Della Reese, or some other “honorary white person” would be a special guest on a variety show, but that was pretty much it. So it was a big deal when we read in Jet Magazine that a Black child would be appearing on the Art Linkletter Show.

Linkletter was the host of an exceedingly successful variety show which was broadcast *live* on CBS. The show’s most popular segment was called “Kids Say the Darndest Things”. During the segment, Linkletter would interview young children about the stuff of daily life. Kids being kids, their responses were often hilarious.

There I sat, as did a hundred thousand other black folk across the nation, glued to the television set, waiting for our hero to appear. Suddenly he was there on the screen, a little black boy of 5 or 6, smiling toothily as he settled into a swivel chair. Linkletter interviewed first one child, then another. Before long, it was “our” turn. Linkletter greeted the boy warmly, and asked: ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’ The boy paused briefly, then answered confidently: “When

I grow up I want to be a white man." My heart stopped, and my breath along with it, but Linkletter forged ahead. "And why is that?" he asked. "Because," said the little Black boy, "My momma says that niggas ain't worth shit!"

The network instantly cut to a commercial. When the show returned, my "coulda been little brother" had been whisked off the set, and Linkletter continued as if nothing had happened. But no commercial break could stanch the psychic wound that had been opened up in an entire community in that moment of childlike innocence. In the countless barber shop and church basement post mortems that followed, no one blamed the boy. In fact, very few people blamed his mother, because we understood that internalized racism really is a *thing*.

When I was approaching 30 years of age and practicing law in New York City, I got a phone call from my mother saying that my father had recently discovered that his birth certificate was defective, so he had decided to fly down to Hartsville, *Tennessee* to visit the church where his birth was recorded. And, my mom continued, he wanted my sister and me to accompany them. The story sounded a little fishy to me, but whatever my father's *real* reason for returning home after an absence of 40 years, I was more than happy to tag along.

As we rolled into Hartsville, my Uncle Perry and Aunt Lottie Dee were setting on the porch, rocking back and forth. Surprisingly, they did not get up to greet us as we scrambled out of the car. I learned later that they had decidedly mixed feelings about being visited by relatives from up North who they assumed would be uppity. We were *not* ... and soon everyone was having a rollicking good time.

During our stay, our Southern family was visited by a distinguished looking white man. He was the president of one of the two banks in town, and his last name was Dalton, the same as mine. As it turns out, the visit was purely social. The bank president updated my relatives on what was going on in his family – this person graduated from high school; that person had a baby – and my Southern family updated him on what was going on in *their* lives. It was an oddly *intimate* exchange, made possible because underneath all the cordiality, everyone understood that certain lines could not and would not be crossed.

As the conversation continued, it dawned on me that the reason the visitor and I share the same last name is because his family used to “own” my family. I later learned that this historical tie was freely acknowledged, even as it remained unspoken. *Also* unspoken was the fact that they and we, or at least some of them and some of us, were related by *blood*, as was evidenced by members of my family with “fair skin” and “good hair”. According to family lore, Massuh was not the only one who was jumping the fence. Reportedly, Miss Anne was tipping around as well, which is every Southern gentleman’s worst nightmare. Slavery was as intimate as it was vile. The enslavers and the enslaved, including white Daltons and Black Daltons then and now, were in an asymmetrical *relationship* with one another that was complex, real, and incredibly *distorted*.

I want to thank Daniel Simons for agreeing to include Paul's letter to Philemon in this morning's liturgy. We don't know much about Philemon, but he must have been a man of considerable means since he owned a house big enough for the

People of the Way to gather there, and it had a guest room where Paul was hoping to stay when he was released from prison. At the outset of the letter, Paul tells Philemon that despite being locked behind bars he has heard of the amazing love that Philemon has poured over his flock, and of the abiding faith that Philemon has exhibited in everything he has done. In a truly memorable phrase, Paul says: “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.”

Paul then proceeds to ask Philemon for a favor. It concerns a man named *Onesimus*, to whom Paul has become close while in prison. Paul says to Philemon, “I am appealing to you for my *child*, Onesimus, whose *father* I have become during my imprisonment. I am sending him ... back to you ... so that you might [receive him as] ... a *brother* ... both in the *flesh* and in the *Lord*,” which is to say both as a child of God and as one of your own kin.

There was, however, one little hitch. Paul says he is sending Onesimus *back* to Philemon. That is because Onesimus and Philemon were already well acquainted. More specifically, Onesimus used to be Philemon’s *slave*. In fact, he is *still* Philemon’s slave. His *runaway* slave, who made his way to Rome, where he landed in prison, the same prison as Paul.

There is a second difficulty that Paul has to overcome. It seems that Onesimus stole *property* from Philemon. The main thing Onesimus stole was *himself*. By running away, he absconded with one of Philemon’s most *prized* possessions, the

body of another human being. Onesimus also stole *money* from Philemon, presumably to finance his escape.

Paul recognizes that this theft thing might be a problem, so he says to Philemon, “If [Onesimus] has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to *my* account ... [and] I will repay it.” But there is no way that Paul can finesse the fact that he is obligated under the law to return Onesimus to his “rightful owner.” So Paul does just that. He *obeys* the law, technically, even as he *undermines* it by engineering Onesimus’s freedom. *Paul then goes a step further.* He says to Philemon, “Welcome my *son* as you would welcome me.” “Receive him as a child of God, and as if he were your own flesh and blood.”

It is this “step further” that *we* as children of God are called to take when addressing slavery in our own time and place, the ongoing legacy of chattel slavery, *and* slavery in its modern forms, including the over-incarceration of Black men. We, the children of the Most High, are called to do more than *acknowledge* that we are descendants of enslavers and the enslaved. We are called to take the “step further” of rectifying the *damage* that was done by them and to them, and the damage we do to one another. We, the body of Christ, are called to *repair* the *breach*, and to love one another into wholeness and righteousness. Chatting amiably across the fence, or in the parlor, or in the parish hall, while so much remains unsaid and unattended to, is simply not enough. Amen.