

“The Bible and the Legacy of Slavery in America”

Sermon based on Numbers 14:18, Matt. 7:12, Luke 4:16-21, Gal. 3:28, Col. 3:22-24

Paul E. Capetz

Christ Church by the Sea (United Methodist), Newport Beach

January 26, 2020

This past Monday our nation observed “Martin Luther King Jr. Day.” King was our country’s most famous civil rights leader. He was struck down by an assassin’s bullet on April 4, 1968, at the young age of 39, leaving behind a widow and four small children. Despite the shortness of his life, King accomplished so much that changed our nation forever. As a result of his leadership, discrimination based on race or skin color was outlawed and America took an important step forward in the direction of realizing its ideal of “liberty and justice for all.”

King was not only a shaper of American history but also an exemplary Christian. If we would appreciate his real significance, we must remember that he was first and foremost a Baptist minister. Even his work in the movement for civil rights was an extension of his calling to serve the church. Historically, the black church provided black people a refuge from the cruelties and humiliations they have had to suffer in America. It was in the church that they felt a sense of their dignity and worth as human beings created in the image of God. Although King’s tangible accomplishments were political and legal in nature, they were the fruits of the religious and moral convictions that had been nurtured in the black church. Since we here in this church are both American citizens and Christians, we should ask ourselves: What significance does King’s legacy have for us as we seek to live out our Christian discipleship in the context of the American nation? What can predominantly white churches learn from this legacy of the black church that Dr. King embodied so well?

Listen to these words written by King as he recalled the incident in his childhood that first taught him what it meant to be black in America:

From about the age of three up...I had had a white playmate who was about my age. We always felt free to play our childhood games together. He did not live in our community, but he was usually around every day until about 6:00; his father owned a store just across the street from our home. At the age of six we both entered school—separate schools of course. I remember how our friendship began to break as soon as we entered school—this was not my desire but his. The climax came when he told me one day that his father had demanded that he would play with me no more. I never will forget what a great shock this was to me. I immediately asked my parents about the motive behind such a statement. We were at the dinner table when the situation was discussed, and here for the first time I was made aware of the existence of a race problem. I had never been conscious of it before. As my parents discussed some of the tragedies that had resulted from this problem and some of the insults they themselves had confronted on account of it I was greatly shocked, and from that moment on I was determined to hate every white person. As I grew older and older this feeling continued to grow. My parents would always tell me that I should not hate the white [man], but that it was my duty as a Christian to love him. At this point the religious element came in. The question arose in my mind, how could I love a race of people [who] hated me and who had been responsible for breaking me up with one of my best childhood friends? This was a great question in my mind for a number of years. I did not conquer this anti-white feeling until

I entered college and came in contact with white students through working in interracial organizations.

Imagine how an experience like this scars a child's psyche! How does a child make sense of a world in which he cannot be friends with a white boy because he himself is black? I don't think that most of us who are white really comprehend the extent of the trauma that black people have suffered in this country. Of course, we are all more or less familiar with the outlines of this terrible history: captured Africans were sold as slaves in this country; after the Civil War that brought an official end to slavery, these former slaves were denied equal treatment under the law; and during the long era of segregation known as "Jim Crow," they were kept in line by the terror of the Ku Klux Klan and the ever present threat of lynching. This, in brief, is the historical context for understanding the rise of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. But for those of us who grew up white in America, this has been somebody else's story, not ours; this has been their experience of America, not ours. That's why it's hard for us to comprehend the emotional wounds that black people carry around inside since we haven't experienced them ourselves. I never had to have this conversation at the dinner table with my parents. I grew up in an entirely white enclave during the 1960s, sheltered from the drama that was then unfolding in Selma and Montgomery.

But for this reason, I feel very fortunate that I eventually had the opportunity to become involved in a black church for a few years in Minneapolis. Here's how this involvement came about. I once went to hear a black professor of theology give a lecture at a national gathering of theological educators. In front of hundreds of mostly white professors, he asked a question I will

never forget: “Why don’t white theologians ever make racism their issue?” For years, he had been writing and teaching future ministers about what it means to be black in America. I had read some of his books and admired him for doing this important work. Still, it had never occurred to *me* to teach a course on the history of the black church at my seminary. Yet there he was, challenging white professors like me to take responsibility for educating future ministers on the black religious experience in America. When I heard him ask this question (“Why don’t white theologians ever make racism *their* issue?”), I thought to myself: “Yeah, why don’t we?” Hearing him pose this question was like listening to a preacher at a revival meeting: I felt the Holy Spirit was convicting me in my heart. I promptly resolved to teach a course on the black church experience.

Shortly after the seminary had publicized that I’d be offering this course, I got a call from a black pastor in Minneapolis. She told me how delighted she was that I was going to teach this course and she was calling to ask if she might enroll in it, even though she was not a student at the seminary. Of course, I was happy to have her participation in the class. Then I got an idea. I asked if I could teach the course at her church, which was in a black neighborhood of the city, instead of at the seminary, which was in a white suburb, so that my students, most of whom were white, could have the chance to get to know her part of town. She thought that was a terrific idea. Having decided that the class would be held off-campus at a black church, I then required my students in the class to attend worship at her church every Sunday for the duration of the semester. But that meant I, too, would be attending her church on Sunday mornings.

All in all, the course turned out to be a transformational experience for everyone involved, black and white. To be sure, there were a few tense moments when black students protested that the white students failed to appreciate what black people had suffered throughout their history or when white students felt put on the defensive in the face of black anger. But even these encounters proved to be important teaching moments because, whether we were black or white, we were learning that, although we had grown up in the same nation, we lived in different worlds. After the semester was over, I wrote a letter to the black professor whose question to white professors of theology had first challenged me to teach a course on black religious history. I told him of the impact his question had made on me and how I responded to his challenge. He wrote me a very gracious letter in reply, in which he expressed his belief that we will never overcome the hatred and fear dividing black and white in America unless we make the effort to walk a mile in the other's shoes. I agree. For this reason, I continued to teach the course on black religious history on a regular basis for the next few years until I left Minneapolis to return to California.

One of the insightful observations made by Dr. King was this: "We must face the sad fact that at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning when we stand to sing 'In Christ there is no East or West,' we stand in the most segregated hour of America." Sad, but true! That's why one of the benefits for me of attending the black church was being able to experience a form of worship I had not known before. Some of you think my sermons are too long. Well, attend a black church and see how long their sermons are! Worship services go on for hours. But people don't sit still in their pews like we do either. They get up and wander around, stand in the back talking to their friends, as well as shout and talk back to the preacher during the sermon. Their services are far

more interactive and less formal than ours are. I enjoyed black worship very much. But most important of all to me, however, was listening to the sermons and learning how black Christians interpret the Bible to shed light on their history of oppression in America. They read it as the story of an oppressed people very much like themselves. In the stories of the Hebrew slaves, they read about a God who acted to liberate those who suffered under the brutal lash of their taskmasters. In the story of Jesus, they read about a poor marginalized Jew who did good for people, but who was tortured and crucified, which was the Roman version of a lynching; but God confounded the enemies of Jesus by raising him victorious from the dead. In the Bible, the blacks read about oppressed people and how God liberated them because he loved them.

The great irony in all this is that black slaves were taught Christianity by their white masters. These white Christians who bought and owned slaves read the Bible very differently. Perhaps you've had the chance to see the movie called "Harriet" which was recently in the theatres; it's the true story of Harriet Tubman, a slave woman who escaped her master by fleeing to a free state. But once there, she felt morally obligated to return secretly in order to assist other slaves to escape their masters. The movie is a tale of great courage on the part of a remarkable human being in the face of unspeakable evil. But the movie begins with a very revealing scene: The slaves have been assembled in front of the master while the minister reads to them from the Bible: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything...fearing the Lord" (Col. 3:22). The white Christians thought that, by embracing Christianity, the slaves would be more obedient to their masters because the Bible shows that it is God's will that some be masters and that some be slaves. For me, it was chilling to watch that opening to see how the Bible had been used by Christians to justify the enslavement of an entire population of human beings. It made me shiver

to be reminded that the Bible had been invoked in support of slavery. How was it possible for two groups of Christians to interpret the Bible so differently? The black Christians interpreted it as a story of how God had once liberated the slaves from Egypt and was soon going to liberate the slaves in America. Moreover, they could point to Paul's affirmation in the New Testament that "In Christ, there is neither slave nor free" (Gal. 3:28) to show that God does not believe in slavery. The white Christians, however, interpreted the Bible to justify slavery as an institution that had God's approval; after all, why would the Bible contain instructions to both slaves and masters if slavery was contrary to the will of God? Both groups of Christians could cite different texts in the Bible to back up their interpretations of it.

The question of slavery tore American churches apart. Abolitionists in the North had to argue that slavery was morally wrong in spite of what the Bible appeared to say in support of it. Defenders of slavery in the South had many passages in the Bible on their side with which to argue their case that there is nothing inherently immoral about slavery as an institution. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, opposed slavery; but American Methodists were of two minds on the issue of slavery from early on. Approximately 15 years before the start of the Civil War, the Methodist Church split into northern and southern branches over their inability to come to agreement on the question of slavery. On one side there was an ethical argument: slavery is morally wrong because it violates the inherent dignity of human beings; since blacks are human beings, it is wrong to enslave them. On the other side was the Bible, believed to be the very Word of God itself, divinely inspired and thus to be obeyed completely in every respect: since both the Old and New Testaments contain injunctions regulating the relations between masters and slaves, the institution of slavery itself cannot be contrary to God's will.

So, what happens when our reason and conscience tell us one thing, but the Bible tells us something else? Even if we believe that God gave us the Bible, don't we also believe that God gave us our reason and our conscience? In my judgment, God expects us to use our reason and conscience to their fullest capacities. And if the Bible seems to teach something that goes against what reason and conscience teach us, then we better be careful not to abdicate reason and conscience too quickly on behalf of a blind obedience to the Bible. Let me give you an example.

Regarding the controversy over slavery, one Episcopal bishop wrote these words: "If it were a matter to be decided by personal sympathies, tastes, or feelings, I should be as ready as any man to condemn the institution of slavery, for all my prejudices of education, habit, and social position stand entirely opposed to it. But as a Christian...I am compelled to submit my weak and erring intellect to the authority of the Almighty."¹ Note well what this man has said: "If it were up to me, I would oppose slavery because my reason and conscience tell me it is morally wrong; but since I am a Christian, I cannot trust my reason and conscience to tell me what is right and wrong; instead, I have to place my trust in the higher authority of the Bible." Is this really what Christianity demands of us, that we abdicate our God-given capacities of reason and conscience in order to obey the Bible? Even when the moral stakes are so high as they were in the matter of slavery? Was there not some other way to interpret those passages of the Bible that appeared to sanction slavery other than to say that the institution is in accord with God's will? I shudder to think how God will judge this Episcopal bishop on Judgment Day. I think God will say to him, "You abused your office as a minister of the gospel to justify the oppression of

¹ Cited on the opening page by J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

enslaved people, appealing to the authority of the Bible as a pretext; even though you knew slavery was wrong, you refused to heed your reason and conscience, which I gave to you so that you would know the difference between right and wrong.” I bring up this example because there are still so many misguided Christians today who abdicate their rational and moral capacities in order to submit to the authority of the Bible in an uncritical manner. Even now in our day, the Methodist Church is on the verge of another split because of this very same struggle between blind obedience to the Bible and what reason and conscience tell us is right and good.

But look at what the Bible itself says: “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do so to them; for this is [the meaning] of the law and the prophets” (Matt. 7:12). This is the “Golden Rule”: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Jesus says that this is the whole point of everything taught in the Bible. And even though the Golden Rule is found in the Bible, it didn’t have to be revealed to us by God; it is found in every other religion as well. That’s because it is a self-evident moral principle, self-evident, that is, if you rationally think about what morality means. I am a person and I know how I want others to treat me. You are also a person; therefore, I know how to treat you. So, I treat you the way I want others to treat me. It’s self-evident. But why didn’t the Christian defenders of slavery use this principle to govern their approach to the Bible? After all, Jesus himself tells us that this is the entire point of the teaching found in the law and the prophets. Why didn’t the Episcopal bishop or the other white Christians who defended slavery by appealing to the Bible’s authority interpret those verses in the Bible addressed to masters and slaves in the light of the Golden Rule? Why didn’t they ask themselves: “Would I ever want to be enslaved to someone else? Would I ever want to be treated like that by another human being?” They could have asked themselves this question,

but they didn't. Like so many Christians, they seized on individual passages taken out of their historical context, neglecting to look at the larger and more important themes of the Bible: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, for this is the law and the prophets."

I once had a wise professor of history in college who often lamented that human history is the story of what could have been different but wasn't. If only people had made other decisions, history would have been different. But, alas, we have to deal with what actually happened in history, even if the decisions made by our ancestors were foolish and evil. That's why Moses declared, "The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon children, upon the third and fourth generation" (Num. 14:18). It's the last part of this verse that I want to highlight: "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and fourth generation." As Americans we have inherited a deeply troubled and troubling history when it comes to race relations. As a society we are still paying the heavy price for the sins committed by our forebears who enslaved blacks and then continued to treat them in a most dehumanizing manner after slavery was abolished. Most of these people understood themselves as good Bible-believing Christians. Long after Dr. King's death, racial tensions are with us still, and none of us is unscathed by this horrible history, whether we are black or white.

I'm grateful for the experiences I've had learning about the black church in America and being able to participate in its worship life. These experiences taught me a lot about what it means to be both an American and a Christian. I learned how important it is that we think carefully about how we interpret the Bible, especially when it comes to moral questions like: Is it

ever right to enslave other human beings? As we have seen, the Bible says all sorts of things: white Christians who defended slavery could appeal to many passages in the Bible to support their position; black Christians could appeal to larger themes in the Bible that affirm God's concern to liberate those who are enslaved by earthly masters. Whenever there is a conflict regarding the interpretation of the Bible, we have to decide: Who's right and who's wrong? I think that the black Christians were right about the Bible and its fundamental message of liberation for the oppressed.

When Jesus preached his inaugural sermon at the beginning of his ministry in his hometown synagogue, he read from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...[and] to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18). Is this any different than what Dr. King said when he proclaimed: "I have a dream that one day...the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood...I have a dream that one day little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.." May it be so! Amen.