

Remembrance and Reconciliation

A sermon delivered at Broadway United Church of Christ, New York City,
by the Rev. Lorence A. Long on August 17, 2008

Genesis 45.15 “And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.”

Last April, as Marj and I were traveling North from Florida, we decided to make a brief side trip—just three hours--to visit Charleston, South Carolina. Marj went shopping for a birthday present for one of the grandchildren, as she often does, and found what she wanted at a stand in the City Market run by a pleasant young woman.

“Oh, by the way,” Marj asked her as she paid the bill, “can you tell me how to find the Old Slave Market here?”

“Yes,” the woman responded, “there is an Old Slave Market. But we never sold any slaves there.”

Now that’s not true. Even the official web page for the city of Charleston—perhaps with a touch of civic pride--acknowledges that Charleston was the center of the domestic slave trade after 1808, when importation of slaves was no longer legal. There were 41 slave auction houses in Charleston at the height of this business. The only one left, now the Old Slave Market Museum, contains—as many did—an auction room, a jail, and a morgue. (Charleston web site, <http://www.charlestoncity.info/dept/content.aspx>)

By saying “we never sold any slaves there,” instead of “they,” the woman identified herself as part of a movement that is trying to rewrite the true history of the South. I thought she was just weird, but her denial was echoed in a passage from a web site I found a few days later. Let me quote:

“There’s a very old public market in Charleston, S.C., that’s often called the slave market... although locals will be quick to tell you that slaves were never sold there. Nobody seems to know how the place... ever got the name of slave market.

The writer continues: “I came across the answer to this while reading a book which extracted heavily from records of the time. It turns out that the market was run by slaves. Out on the rice plantations, ...after a slave completed his task for the day, he was free to work a small plot to produce food for himself and his family. Usually if they had surplus produce they would either take it to town or sell it to a trader, likely a slave, who would take it to the market and resell it to women set up there.”

<http://home.att.net/~n4dee/market.htm>

So now we know. It was called a slave market, because it was run by slaves. These entrepreneurial slaves were free to grow their own crops, and go to town, and sell their

produce for pocket money. Right? Then of course you'd have to ask why they needed a jail and a morgue!

Northerners have more successfully cleaned up their history of this period. I didn't know until the New York Historical Society did its show on "Slavery In New York" a couple of years ago that at the time of the American Revolution, New York had more slaves than any other American city---except Charleston! (Berlin, I., and Harris, L. [2005]. *Slavery in New York*. New York: The New Press.)

New England, too, has hidden--and hidden from--its true story. You undoubtedly have noticed the proud list of events from our Congregationalist tradition in the Church bulletin. But there is more to the story than that: many of our Pilgrim and Puritan ancestors in the faith owned slaves, and benefitted from the slaves' contribution to the local economy.

The religious authorities of Massachusetts Bay were in favor of slavery. It was seen as being approved in the Bible. (<http://www.slavenorth.com/massachusetts.htm>) Cotton Mather, a very prominent preacher and writer in Boston at the turn of the 18th century, believed that African slaves were equal with free whites before God, but that this in no way affected their status as slaves. They should be baptized, and would go to heaven, he said, but they should also be obedient to their masters. Mather had a slave who had been given to him as a present by his congregation at Old North Church. He called him Onesimus, after the faithful slave in Paul's letter to Timothy. Knowing of the terrible threat that smallpox posed to the community, the slave told Mather about a preventive process that he had undergone in Africa before his capture. Some pus from an infected person had been placed in a cut on his body, and he had therefore not had the disease. Fearing for his son's life, Mather inoculated him, and then, in the face of great hostility--including a bomb thrown into his house--advocated for inoculation. Onesimus remained a slave in Mather's household for years afterward, obviously quite important to the family, but always a slave, all the same. (Weiner, M. [2004]. "This miserable African." <http://www.common-place.org/vol-04/no-03/weiner/>)

Slaves were bought and sold in great numbers in Boston. They were put to work in the New England mills. By 1752, ten per cent of the people of Boston were of African descent.

At the end of the Revolutionary War, in 1783, Massachusetts slaves were freed. And by the 1830's, a portrait of New England without any mention of slavery was promoted by Daniel Webster and others, in order to try to gain a moral advantage over their Southern opponents. Whites, said Webster, had developed New England's prosperity solely with their own hands.

In fact, a century and a half of New England slavery and slave-trading had, in the words of one historian, "financed the first families and institutions of [Daniel Webster's] home

district.” Undoubtedly among those institutions benefitting were the local Congregational churches nestled picturesquely on village greens.

The New England story is of course a mixed one. The culture that had held slaves also inspired those who were opposed to slavery. There were those publicly opposed to slavery at the time of Mather, and as time went on, many New Englanders were among the most vocal supporters of abolition.

Memory has many different rooms. It can be a dungeon, which we sometimes use to torture ourselves. It can be a shrine of heroics, useful for inspiring us. It can be a secret room with several locks, used to hide embarrassing moments, or years, or decades. Or it can be a classroom, a place in which to learn. Memory and its official partner, history, can perform these functions both for societies and for individuals.

Forgiveness is the act that can redeem memory, to turn it in to a learning place. But finding forgiveness is not always simple.

Traditionally, the prelude to preparing for forgiveness is first recognizing our sins, which often involves the act of empathy—being able to see how the world looks through the eyes of another person who has been affected by our actions. After recognition comes repentance, which means turning aside from those sins. And—sometimes—it means making amends for the harm we have done. Often this involves an apology. It may also involve taking more substantial steps to undo some of the results of our errors.

Knowing the truth about our history helps us recognize both the worst that we are capable of, and the best, as well. We may think that forgetting both types of histories will relieve us of responsibility. But it also keeps us from learning what we need to know about ourselves and others.

Some people can't forget. Those whose ancestors were oppressed, and those who are oppressed today, often feel it is their duty to remember. They must not only remember the worst and the best of their own history. They must also keep in mind the worst in the history of the majority group, so that they are not victimized again. That was what Dr. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Trinity UCC in Chicago, and a young potential member, Barack Obama, talked about twenty years ago, the first time they met. George Packer, writing in the *New Yorker* back in March, tells the story this way: “...The young community organizer tried to make a point about the growing importance of class in America. ...Wright wasn't having any of it. ‘These miseducated brothers... talking about ‘the declining significance of race.’ Now, what country [are they] living in?’ (“Native Son,” *The New Yorker*, March 31, 2008, pp. 39-40.) Forgetting is dangerous, from Dr. Wright's point of view.

Dr. Wright is not the only one who believes remembering the troubled past is important. New York Governor David Paterson spoke about this to the national NAACP in July. He was concerned about the possibility of a resurgence of racism in this country. He spoke of the complacency of some members of the younger generation of blacks about the civil rights struggle. They were making a mistake if they thought that they could simply go forward without taking that history into account. (Peters, J., "Paterson, addressing NAACP, warns of racism's lingering power," *NY Times*, July 18, 2008.)

Let's turn our attention to the story of Joseph. For reconciliation to take place, some moral reckoning has to occur. We can see this in the example of Joseph, presented in our Genesis Scripture lesson as welcoming and forgiving his brothers. But that's the very end of a complicated story. Three whole chapters before were about the ordeal that Joseph put his brothers through. I will try to condense the story. (Read it for yourself, if you want to get the full flavor.)

Ten of his brothers had planned to kill him, because they were jealous of the special attention their father Jacob gave him. But at the last minute, they sold him into slavery in Egypt instead. As a slave in Egypt, he had many adventures. But in the end, through his ability to interpret the dream of Pharaoh about seven years of good crops and seven years of famine, he not only won his freedom, but became that country's Secretary of Homeland Security. He was placed in charge of gathering grain in the good years, to prepare for the epic famine that he had forecast.

When the famine reached the land of Canaan, Joseph's father, Jacob, sent those same ten of his sons to Egypt to buy grain. He kept his beloved son, Benjamin, home to protect him. When the brothers appeared in Joseph's reception room, they did not know him. But Joseph recognized them. He decided to give them a reason to remember their history, and to regret it. The ordeal that he devised included accusing them of being spies and thieves, putting them in prison, and sending them back to Canaan again to bring Benjamin with them. He finally placed his silver cup inside the luggage of Benjamin, and then accusing the brothers of stealing it. Perhaps Joseph originally intended to keep only Benjamin with him, and let the others go. When confronted about the alleged theft, they said, "We wouldn't do that. Let whoever did such a thing become the slave of Joseph." When the cup was found in Benjamin's sack, the brothers were quite distressed. Joseph pretended to comfort them by saying that only the one in whose sack the cup was found would become his slave; the others could go home to their father. Judah, the leader, the one who had made Joseph a slave, said that his father would die if Benjamin did not return; and Judah offered to *be Joseph's slave in his place*. Now the theme of slavery had come full circle. Confronted with Judah's willingness to risk slavery, Joseph melted. He revealed himself to his brothers, and reached out to them in reconciliation.

This was not easy for Joseph. At the beginning, he could have let bygones be bygones, simply ignored the history, shaken hands with the brothers, and sent them on their way.

But the power of the memory demanded that he confront his brothers with a profound moral dilemma that would force them to remember and reflect on what they had done. And this led to a change of heart on their part, which moved Joseph to forgive.

Did you know that two weeks ago, a resolution passed a nearly-empty House of Representatives late at night—maybe you weren't watching C-Span at that hour--expressing an official apology for “wrongs committed against [African-Americans] and their ancestors who suffered under slavery and Jim Crow.” This is the famous apology for slavery, an idea that has gone nowhere for years. It was sponsored by Steve Cohen, a white Jewish Democratic congressman from Memphis, Tennessee who was embroiled in a bitter primary campaign against a black candidate in a predominantly black district. (Nossiter, A. “Race takes central role in a Memphis primary,” *NY Times*, August 7, 2008) It probably passed because the members of the House wanted to help out “the white guy.” The Daily News commented editorially: “It should have been a monumental moment for reflecting on the national soul., but it wasn't. ...The House of Representatives managed to cheapen a resolution repenting of the great American sins of slavery and segregation.” And the News was right. (*NY Daily News*, editorial, August 2, 2008)

But a few days later, Cohen won the primary with 80% of the vote. It was certainly not entirely because of the resolution, but more because the black candidate had run a campaign that *Times* writer Bob Herbert wrote was so nasty that it was “stomach-turning.” (“Finding the Upside,” *NY Times*, August 9, 2008) This result suggests that if the historical oppressors in our country—that is, whites--step forward in a serious way to take responsibility for the injustices that have been done in the name of race, there might be a response from blacks that would lay the foundation for something like reconciliation.

More than a simple apology would be required. There would, I suspect, need to be a serious attack on some of the abuses and deficits that persist. Some of the areas that might be targeted would include: equal treatment by the police and courts; effective reform of educational systems in every neighborhood; health care that is accessible to all; job creation and education that fits the jobs that become available; affordable housing; and so forth. These measures would have to show that the historical oppressors are serious about changing their ways—repentance, we call it in church.

Writer Toni Morrison, author of *Beloved*, gave an interview years ago about the lack of a memorial to slaves and their history. She said, “There is no suitable memorial or plaque, or wreath or wall, or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower, there's no small bench by the road.” Almost twenty years later, the Toni Morrison Society has begun to plant such small benches in locations of important events in the history of slavery. The first bench was dedicated three weeks ago at Sullivan's Island near Charleston, where 40 per cent of the African slaves who entered the US came off the slave ships.

In an interview in the *New York Times* on July 28th, Ms. Morrison observed: “African-Americans don’t own slavery. ...There were slave masters and there were abolitionists and there were other people who died to see to it that justice was done.” The Times reporter who was present wrote that many participants in that dedication ceremony said that “...before there is reconciliation or healing, there needs to be a better acknowledgement of the past. (Lee, F. “Bench of memory at slavery’s gateway, *NY Times*, July 28, 2008.)

As Christians, our task is not simply to work toward reconciliation in civil society, but to fulfill the second great commandment, to love our neighbors as ourselves. Judging from our Gospel lesson (Matthew 15:21-28), perhaps even Jesus sometimes learned new lessons about who his neighbors were. In the context of the issue of race, it means that we must lead the way. We must accept the burden of our history, and find ways to create a different history for those who come after us.

May God grant that it be so. Amen.