

Reflections for Martin Luther King Day 2010

Martha Hubbard asked me to offer some reflections on St. Paul's connection to slavery in honor of Martin Luther King Day. She knows I have been researching that piece of history, sparked by our viewing of the film "Traces of the Trade" last year and in response to an inquiry from St. James Church in Amesbury. It seems St. James took very seriously the Diocesan Convention resolution, taken from the General Convention's resolution, entitled "Slavery & Racial Reconciliation", stating that each parish implement a process for collecting and documenting detailed information on the complicity of the Episcopal Church in Massachusetts in the institution of slavery and the subsequent history of segregation and discrimination, and the economic benefits the Episcopal Church and its parishes derived from the institution of slavery. I suspect not many parishes are taking up this task, or even know about the resolution. The St. James email forwarded to me was the first I had heard of it. The much more impassioned topic of gay marriage seemed more present on everyone's lips and minds.

It's a tall order to cover all the ground spelled out above. I prefer to spin off on a section of the resolution that asks parishes to "commit to becoming a transformed, anti-racist church and work toward healing, reconciliation and a restoration of wholeness to the family of God." So today I would like to tell two stories, one from within the history of the parish and one without. One is a story of personal transformation and the other is not.

But first some background history. As you all know St. Paul's was gathered as a parish in 1711 during the reign of Queen Anne, a time when slavery was a well established and accepted part of society and life both in England and the American Colonies. It may interest you to know that the Massachusetts Bay Colony was the first British Colony on mainland America to make slavery legal in 1641, a full generation before the Southern States. A law passed in 1670 made it legal for the children of slaves to be sold into bondage, lest anyone equivocate on the selling of children. The institution lasted longer in Massachusetts than any of the original 13 colonies, 142 years.

Christianity was certainly not a barrier to slave ownership. Puritan leaders like Cotton Mather told congregations from the pulpit that black Africans were the

“miserable children of Adam and Noah” for whom the God of Israel had ordained slavery as a punishment. The early puritans, or “Pure Ones”, believed firmly in the idea of predestination, that God has ordained a fate for all of us which should not be challenged but born with humility and forbearance.

Our own early Rector Mathias Plant, “a sober and ingenious man”, was a slave owner. In his diary on June 23rd 1735 he recorded, “I wrote to Mr. Salmon of Barbadoes to send me a negro”. We know the names of his slaves, Luke, and Lucy and Robin who were likely a married couple, from our own church records of baptism. Rev. Plant favored a Christian marriage for slaves. Likewise he believed in baptism for Negro children or adults who wished to be saved in the afterlife, and he preached so to his parishioners, a rare promoter of the theology of inclusion for the times. Not all deemed it a good or prudent idea, church attendance, baptism and marriage occurred only at the pleasure of a slave’s master. At his death Rev. Plant’s will freed his slaves on the death of his wife, and provided for them in recompense for their “very respectful and dutiful service as honest servants.”

For the English born successful and wealthy men of cities like Newburyport, holding slaves was a sign of their station in life, a reward and a sign of God’s beneficence. Slave labor helped support their mansions, large households and substantial farms. If our Church founders were alive today they would be very familiar with the slave trade as a business, and ships holding slaves entering and leaving Newburyport harbor. They would likely tell us they had saved their personal slaves from the savagery of Africa and from the brutal sugar fields of the plantations of the West Indies where men and women were routinely beaten and worked to death. They would also tell us the enslavement of Africans and other savages, like Native Americans, was a part of the order of creation and God’s plan, much as the monarchy was likewise an indispensable part of that Order that stretched in an unbroken line from Biblical days. History taught many lessons about the social chaos that ensued with the shattering of that Order.

The most desirable African slaves were those who were “broken in” by spending a year or two in the plantations fields. Massachusetts masters preferred younger males and teenage female slaves to train as servants and apprentices to various trades. In 1752 African Americans made up 10% of Boston’s population. By all

accounts it was a brutal and abominable business here as elsewhere. But a life in Newburyport was better than a life in the plantations in this harsh world where slavery existed, and everyone knew it.

But enough historical background for now....

The first person I want to talk to you about should be well known to you, Tristram Dalton, the Squire of Greenleaf's Lane. As you may well know he was born on State Street in the building now occupied by the Dalton Club. He was born in 1738 into a life of privilege, the son of a wealthy merchant. He attended the Governor's Academy and like any young man of his class was expected, went to Harvard along with his classmate John Adams. Swayed like many young men of his time by the ideals of the Enlightenment, and who as merchants did not want their profits taxed by a far off Great Britain they had no knowledge of, he early joined the cause of rebellion. As a man of privilege, some talent and very good connections he progressed through the committees of safety, the Massachusetts Senate and House, and finally, after the Revolutionary War, was elected to the first Congress of this new United States. Good fortune however did not follow him, as he literally drew the short straw for a two year term and was not re-elected. His fortune subsequently lost by bad luck and bad investments, he sank into poverty before he died, proceeded by all his children. On his death his body was transported back to Newburyport to rest in the tomb he originally built for his parents, the only resting place open to him.

So that is a very short sketch of an event filled life lived through some extraordinary times. But the real story I want to tell is this. In July of 1804 an adult male African slave named Fortune was buried in Old Hill Burying Ground, the one directly by the Bartlett Mall and Frog Pond. His modest but substantial stone marker reads "In Memory of Fortune a faithful servant who died July 16th, 1804. This stone is erected by Tristram Dalton." At first thought it seems like the magnanimous gesture of a former master to a faithful, and likely obedient, former slave who was held in fond memory. And it very well may be so. But if we look a little deeper a different picture may emerge.

Few former slaves ever earned the unusual honor of having a grave marker made of stone and a burial in the central community cemetery of a white community.

Only a handful of modest markers, three or four, for freed African Americans of that era exists in the cemeteries of Newburyport, mostly for those who bought their freedom through service in the Revolutionary War. Fortune's burial is all the more extraordinary because slaves were typically buried in out of the way places such as clearings in the woods, sometimes with a wooden tablet for their name if anything at all. In the old territory of Newbury there are undoubtedly slave burial grounds that have long since disappeared from memory, existing now in quiet anonymity in overgrown woodlands.

Fortune was likely a house slave to Tristram and his wife Ruth, perhaps bought as a child. He probably had the opportunity of proximity to develop a personal relationship with his masters, and they with him. Since masters rarely owned enough slaves to justify building a separate residence, they shared the living quarters and the domestic routines of their masters's family.

Although enjoying the benefits of his class, Tristram Dalton was someone who rebelled against the established societal order and embraced the ideals of individual liberty as a grown man. He consistently voted against the slave trade in the first Congress of the United States. His support of the 1783 Massachusetts Supreme Judiciary Court decree judging slavery incompatible with the Massachusetts Constitution "by which the people of this Commonwealth have solemnly bound themselves" was unwavering. He likely set Fortune and any other slaves he owned free. We have no record, as we have no record of Fortune's life or family, but we know Dalton was a man transformed.

Fortune's death came at a time when Dalton was 66 years old, living in Washington DC after having sold his property in Newburyport and seen his political aspirations and his fortune come to an end. It could not have been without sacrifice he paid for the cost of the burial, engraving and stone, materials dear in those days. In truth, I see Fortune's burial as an act of atonement, or at least reconciliation, for the benefits of an institution he had grown up with and personally enjoyed, and a public atonement at that. I see Dalton's name on the stone as less a sign of immodesty, than a message to his friends and the community that this man was a worthy equal in death if not treated so throughout life.

My second story is about a woman you've never heard of, Pauline Greening, who has a very indirect connection to this parish. Did I mention her married name was de Stadler? Well, she was my paternal grandmother and like a second mother to me. She lived in the old family home not far from my parent's house in Southern Connecticut. Every Sunday throughout my childhood she picked me up in her sturdy black Buick and took me to services at St. John's Episcopal Church in Bridgeport, Connecticut. She was more religiously ambitious and dedicated than my parents who preferred to enjoy the benefits of suburban life, socializing with neighbors and afternoon cocktails on a Sunday.

I remember our trips together vividly, not least because I had to wear my terribly itchy charcoal grey suit, starched white shirt and clip-on tie but also because, if I could make it through the service, the women of the church served us steaming hot chocolate from battered aluminum pitchers. What a delight!

St. John's is a large, lovely Victorian stone treasure, built in the 1870s in the Oxford movement tradition, much more like St. Anna's Chapel than colonial St. Paul's. Bridgeport was a seaside industrial city whose time was rapidly passing; urban decay at the city center had already begun to spread. The demographics were changing quickly, the white middle class fleeing to the suburbs, the wealthy long gone and new arrivals from larger and more decayed urban environments like New York City arriving for a better, safer life and cheaper rents.

The first sign of these changes in our church arrived for us when someone sat in my grandmother's pew. It was her pew because her children, her brother, her parents and her grandparents had sat there. Everyone knew it was her pew, except it seemed, the new arrivals. I remember that day because, as we sat in the pew behind, I listened to her low "harrumphs" throughout the service, barely audible to others but a loud roar to me.

More shocking, most of these new arrivals were not white people. The very dark skinned black women who began coming spoke with clipped Jamaican accents, and were overly friendly and touched others with their hankkerchiefed hands. Worse still, some of the black people were not Jamaican but American blacks for whose presence there could be no excuse. A few seemed to speak another language like Spanish, not as dark skinned but definitely not white.

My grandmother was puzzled but eventually reasoned that they were Puerto Ricans, as anyone who sounded Spanish must be, who thought this was a Roman Catholic Church and therefore were here by mistake. She had several conversations with the rector urging him to inform them that they had undoubtedly made a mistake. To her continual dismay, he seemed to disagree and even delight in the new membership to this ship that had previously been sinking.

Throughout the childhood years I attended services at St. John's I have no recollection whatsoever of what was said in any sermon, homily or reflection like this, but I do remember quite clearly how much earlier we had to arrive each Sunday so we could sit in "our pew". I remember my grandmother's frustrated impatience with me for taking too long to get ready, and the tension of the drive to the church. One particular Sunday she and I sat in that lovely, stained glass filled sanctuary all alone, silently waiting for others to arrive and the morning to begin. Now as an adult I can now understand how lonely and narrow her world had become, how much energy it must have taken from her to resist the changes and maintain the familiar order of things she depended upon, how sad she must have felt underneath about its passing.

Before much longer even more radical changes began to overtake our church world. Parishioners were asked to bake bread to be used for the Eucharist, in place of the host. The hymns and the music started changing. A guitar player showed up by the organ one Sunday and played during the service. Then, momentarily, the peace was instituted before communion. It was the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. To shake hands with strangers was one thing, a valid source of complaint, "Can you imagine?" she would say "strangers!", but to shake hands with people of color, black people as equals or as anything, was just too much. It was beyond her capacity for words. She never spoke of it.

She stopped going to St. John's, and I entered my teenage years when I would not have gone with her anyway.

I'm sure many, if not all of you hearing this reflection on the day before Martin Luther King Day, have your own personal stories to tell about childhood experiences, intolerance, racism, and the challenges of change both personal and spiritual. Thank you for listening to mine. They remain vividly with me.

As I said at the beginning, this is not a story of personal transformation... or is it?

Bronson de Stadler
St. Paul's Church
January 17, 2010