

## **"THE BELOVED COMMUNITY"**

Matthew 22:35-40; John 8:32; Ephesians 2:1-10,13-14; 1 Corinthians 13:12-13

January 17, 2021

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins  
Westminster Presbyterian Church

On and off over the past several years, Miriam has ventured into genealogical research on our family, through ancestry.com and other resources. It won't surprise anybody who's delved into genealogy that this has yielded thousands of names, some dead ends, a few amusing anecdotes, and the odd scandalous discovery (which is a story for another time). Not much in the way of royal connections or ancestors who came over on the Mayflower. But last year, she informed me that we are related to the Fonda family of movie fame, through a mutual ancestor seven or eight generations back. Well, I thought, that's kind of a fun fact. Then she told me the not-fun fact: this Fonda ancestor was a slaveholder.

I have to admit this surprised me a bit. I come from a very working-class background, and had always pretty much assumed that all my forbearers were among the masses who worked in other people's farms, factories, and houses, or eked out a living in humble trades or from tiny plots of land. I had no idea that there was anyone in my family tree who held the power of ownership over other human beings. And I don't know, even now, if there may have been others. It's very possible; after all, going back even a few generations gives you quite a lot of ancestors, some of them unknown.

I got to wondering about those ancestors, and the people they enslaved. I wondered about what became of those slaves, and their children and their children's children. Even more, I wondered how my ancestors and their family benefitted from the unpaid labor they exploited, and how they passed those benefits on to the next and succeeding generations. Monetary inheritances? Family land? Status in the community? Education? Help to start a business? Something as simple as enough economic security to marry and have children or survive a disaster? I have no way of tracing how any of what that long-ago family gained from holding slaves may have translated into advantages for the next generation, and the next, and the next... or in what ways some vestiges of them might have reached me.

But here's the thing: it's a virtual certainty that those advantages existed and persisted in some form, and my not-knowing doesn't make it less real. I didn't know I had this slave-holding ancestor, but he was there all the time in my family history.

Some might say, "Oh, there's no reason to feel guilty about what some ancestor did; it was a long time ago, and you didn't have anything to do with it." To that I would say, I don't feel guilty, but I do feel ... *responsibility*. Because I am connected to this history, and to the present realities. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, "We are caught in

an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." (*Why We Can't Wait*, 1964)

We white Americans are often blind to these connections, to the ways in which the legacy of slavery and our history of racial oppression are woven into the fabric of our society, into our institutions and culture, even into our family stories,... and into the privileges we enjoy. Often we can't see it; or we get defensive about it, claim we're not privileged - and don't get me wrong - I fully agree that there are all different kinds and degrees of privilege.

But our dads or granddads might have gotten an education through the GI Bill. Somebody in our family attended a college founded by slaveowners or funded by their wealth (there are a *lot* of those colleges). Maybe land was acquired through the Homestead Act. One or more of our forebearers likely worked in a trade or profession, or belonged to a union, or went to a school, or lived in a neighborhood, or got a loan not accessible to black Americans. Those are just a few of the advantages that have made the lives of most white Americans easier than the lives of most people of color ... and continue to do so, in ways both subtle and concretely identifiable.

I want to believe that if I had lived back in the late 1700's when my Fonda ancestor lived, I wouldn't have wanted anything to do with slavery. I want to believe I would have joined the abolitionists, opposed segregation, been one of the white people who marched with Dr. King. I think we all want to believe these things. But I'm not sure the grounds for those beliefs are very solid. I don't know that I have any reason to believe I'm any better than my ancestors.

There are a *lot* of things we have wanted to believe - maybe still would like to continue believing- about the history of racism and inequality in our country:

That slavery was an aberration in our otherwise proud history of freedom, equality, and opportunity. That most white people had little or nothing to do with it, and didn't benefit from it. That we've put the effects of slavery, race laws, segregation, systematic discrimination, and the like far behind us. That what racism still exists is a problem - a sin - of individuals who are disturbed or unenlightened or evil, and not also part of a larger picture. That it's "not a big problem" anymore.

But even the tiniest bit of research suggests that none of those beliefs reflect the truth.

Now, I know that some people don't like us to talk about this in church, especially from the pulpit. They feel it's not really something that belongs to the purview of the church. But what are sort of hidden from us now are all the ways the white church *was involved* in constructing and maintaining the structure of racism in America. Over the years, the church made a series of compromises that allowed first slavery and then racist ideology and laws and practices to flourish. One of the most significant, to me,

was the doctrine of “the spirituality of the church” which became very popular in the years before the Civil War. This says essentially that the church should speak only to “spiritual” matters, and not to political or social ones... like slavery. Does that sound familiar? Yes, that still-common belief was initially promulgated by defenders of slavery.

And there’s much, much more: the separation of white congregants from black worshipers, so-called Biblical defenses of slavery and segregation, opposition to or silence about the civil rights movement. Yes, Presbyterians did these things. We are connected with that history. It’s true even if we didn’t know about it or would like to forget it. But if the church helped to create our racial divisions, ought we not to take some responsibility for undoing that damage?

And don’t we, after all, have resources to do that? I don’t mean material resources (although we might have those, too). But what we have that really matters are the resources of our faith.

I don’t find it all that surprising that we have managed to distance ourselves from knowledge of our connection to the ongoing saga of racism in America. But I do wonder a little bit at the extent to which the church (and Christians) have engaged in it, still engage in it. Because as believers, we don’t need that. Our faith and our scriptures show us a better way; they can help us do better. The Bible offers us solid ground for a different path; that’s why I had us hear several scriptures today – to remind us of just how broad and deep that foundation is.

So I want to remind us of these things:

First of all, we are beloved of God. God loves us in spite of all our imperfections, even in spite of the hurt we inflict on one another which hurts God, too. It’s a natural human tendency to want to “clean up” our story, make ourselves look good, distance ourselves from what we aren’t proud of. But we don’t have to do that for God, who knows all about us and loves us anyway. And in that expansive love there is space for healing and change, and for the honesty that makes healing and change possible.

Second, the truth is necessary, and nobody should care more about what is true than the people who follow Jesus, who said, “The truth will make you free.” I suspect this applies especially to truth we find it hard to hear and acknowledge.

We also have in our tradition the prophets of the Old Testament who help us understand that sin is not only a matter of individual attitudes and actions, but can also be corporate, shared, national and cultural. I can’t think of any place where one of them says to the people of Israel, “I know *most* of you aren’t idolatrous and unjust, but a few of you *have* done these things.” No, they always call *all God’s people* to repentance. They understand the way some kinds of sin end up being like an invasive

plant that insinuates its tendrils into and around everything. Nobody is left untouched. And well-meant though they are, personal rejections of racism and acts of generosity are not enough to undo the accumulated harm of centuries of disempowerment, violence, and economic oppression. A different future requires not just changes of individual hearts but a collective sense of responsibility for what has come to pass and what needs to be done.

And we have the testimony of the earliest Christians that Jesus' presence in their midst was the power that could break down the walls of separation between Jews and Gentiles (in their experience, the most present and troublesome division). This vision of Christian unity among diverse people still challenges the church, and holds up a mirror of hard truth to the many ways the church was and is divided by racism. But it also gives us a lively hope that the Christian community *can* and may yet become the body of Christ in the world.

We also have the repeated exhortations of scripture to "love your neighbor, as yourself." To love our neighbor *as ourselves* is to want for our neighbor every good thing, every right, every freedom, every opportunity we want for ourselves. It is to invest ourselves in the interests of our neighbors, in equity, in non-violence and in relationships, in the common good, in an economy and a political system and communities that include and serve everyone.

The "beloved community" of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's vision rests on those scriptures about reconciliation and love. He envisioned that community being rooted and embodied in the church, even as Christians and others worked to realize it in the wider world. He believed that the church was uniquely equipped to embrace that community, because of who we are and what we have experienced of God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ.

Yes, most of all, we have Jesus, probably the greatest example of someone who willingly set aside privilege he could have held onto, for the sake of others, for the sake of love. If anything about our faith calls us to think about what it means that some of us participate in privileges (large and small) others don't have, surely it's Jesus.

When we are tempted to say that we're tired of hearing about racism, that we don't think it's really a problem, that we don't see it, or that some act or word or policy doesn't seem racist to us... maybe we can try to remember that even to say this involves claiming of a certain amount of privilege. You know, a majority of white Americans say they don't think racism is a big problem. But a majority of African Americans feel differently. If we want to be like Jesus, it seems to me that white Christians need to learn to quell the instinct to deny and minimize. And from there, we might move on to consideration of other pieces of privilege we might be called to let go of, so that the beloved community can be more fully realized.

One of the things people sometimes say is that it's 'divisive' for the church to talk about racism. That tends to make us hesitate, naturally; 'divisive' is not a good thing. But I've come to realize that what we mean by that, mostly, is that it disturbs the internal sense of unanimity and comfortable sociability of the white church. What we forget is that the white church's silence about racism has divided us from our sisters and brothers of color. What may look and feel like unity to us can blind us to a deeper division, to a barrier to that beloved community to which we are called. This too needs to be recognized as a form of privilege – the option of turning away... an option not everyone has.

I know that I am largely "preaching to the choir" here. But I also know there is a great deal yet that I don't see or understand about this great unhealed wound of our world, and I'm pretty sure we could all say the same. I do believe we can get better at "un-forgetting" – at knowing our history and acknowledging the often invisible-to-us ways we are embedded in the racism of our culture. If we do, we can maybe show someone else that it's possible to tell those truths, and how good and freeing a thing that can be. Maybe we can take down some little pieces of the barriers that separate us from our sisters and brothers. Maybe our descendants won't have to look back at us and wonder how we got so separated from values of the gospel. Maybe we can help make the beloved community not just a dream, but a living reality. Amen.

#### Resources:

Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*

William A. Darity, Jr. and Kirsten Mullen, *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-First Century*

Carl Gregg, "What do we mean when we say 'Building the Beloved Community?'" [patheos.com](http://patheos.com)

"Justice" [mlk50.civilrightsmuseum.org](http://mlk50.civilrightsmuseum.org)