

the twenty-sixth
Presiding Bishop 
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Service of Repentance, St. Thomas, Philadelphia

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[Episcopal News Service] The great dream of God has always been quite clear to the prophets. Isaiah's vision of delivering good news to the oppressed, liberty to the captives, and comfort the grieving is a whole-hearted and full-bodied expression of abundant life, in right relationship to God and neighbor. Micah says that all that's really important in life is to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly in God's presence. Amos has choice words for those who "sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals" [Amos 2:6], he reminds his hearers that God will not let such transgressions go unpunished.

Human beings have repeatedly forgotten or ignored the image of God borne by their brothers and sisters. We have turned away from loving our neighbors as ourselves. We have degraded those who are like us under the skin, so that we might use them worse than beasts of burden. We have sought to be god, lording it over others. In the process, we have repudiated that divine image in ourselves and discovered that there is little or no health in us.

Human beings have sought to use others for their own ends since we first came down from the trees. We can observe the other apes building dominance hierarchies that minimize some of the violence in their societies, and know that some of that pattern is built into our own DNA. But the supposedly spiritual animal has not risen far above his origins. We are often as fallen as our Biblical ancestors Adam and Eve, seeking to be their own gods.

Slavery has existed from the time one human being could physically compel another to serve desires. It was likely fairly limited initially, for it requires significant superiority in numbers, power, or firearms to enforce the will of one or a few against an entire community. Slaves have long been the spoils of war on every continent, and traded between warring parties in ancient tribal conflicts. Military economies have been built on their labor of slaves -- Rome, Athens, and the other supposed ancestors of modern democracies relied on a subjugated class. Even early Christianity, under Paul's leadership, couldn't really imagine a society without slaves. He reminded them to obey their masters, and the use of proof texts long provided ecclesiastical support to those who tried to justify the propriety of human property.

Yet it was the wholesale trading in slaves, begun under the Portuguese in the 1400s, that scaled up inhumanity to inhuman enormity. More than 10 million slaves were shipped from Africa to the Americas in the next five centuries. In the 18th century alone, Britain shipped 2.5 million slaves. Katrina Browne and Tom DeWolf tell us that the DeWolf family was responsible for importing 10,000 slaves to these shores. And the church was there through it all, giving supposedly sacred support to a degradation of the image of God, in both captive and captor. In the slave ports in Africa, churches were built close to those prisons and holding cells for those soon to be exiled from their native land. The church baptized many, often without informing or asking consent from those who were grafted onto the Body of Christ. Yet, in the persistent reversal of the gospel, lifting up the lowly and putting down the mighty, those seeds took root in rich soil, and grew into fruit those Anglican clergy could never have imagined. That fruit produced eventually seeds that helped to demolish the evil fields in which they were planted. The prophets are often unpopular, but rarely wrong.

The particularly American role in slavery involved people across this land, and not just in the deep South. Katrina Browne's work, and her cousin's book, are opening the eyes and minds of many northerners to the ways in which eminent families and captains of industry and clergy of this church, presiding bishops included, share responsibility to the enormities of slavery. Many in this land continued to profit from the forced labor and deprived liberty of sons and daughters of Africa long after the "legal" end of the commerce in human flesh called the slave trade. They simply exported the greatest evidence of it to places like Cuba. I wonder if our governmental animosity toward that nation might be different today if we did not share guilt for the human conditions there.

Even after the end of the Civil War, a war supposedly fought to free the slaves, to ensure equal human dignity and life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all human beings in this nation, even after that human greed soon re-established the reality of slavery. Douglas Blackmon has written an immensely important book, *Slavery by Another Name*, detailing the intentional and conscious ways in which slavery was effectively reinstated in the southern United States soon after the Civil War. Legally undergirded by criminal penalties that restricted almost every aspect of life for African Americans, those systems forbade even the freedom to work where and for whom one pleased. Those laws provided opportunities to arrest human beings who appeared to be strong manual laborers on the flimsiest of excuses, and then sell those human beings to white farmers, mine owners, foresters, and industrialists -- supposedly to pay off the costs of their arrest and imprisonment.

Blackmon details facts as well as following the stories of individuals and families caught up in those farcical and fiendish proceedings. He reports that by the end of the 1880s at least 10,000 black men were enslaved in southern states, mining, farming, and making turpentine. Miners and industrialists grew wealthy off this ready supply of almost free labor. So did the communities which sold the laborers. By 1889, when its entire annual budget was only about \$1 million, Alabama was garnering more than \$120,000 a year from selling convicts, almost all of them black. But it wasn't just the old Confederacy that was involved. The investments on which the industrialists relied came from New York and Wall Street.

In 1907, one mining company in Birmingham was relying almost exclusively on slave labor. Those mines and their related enterprises sold steel to companies like Southern Pacific and the Union Pacific railroads. It was also the time of a major stock market crash and dire threats to the economy, one which would sound very familiar to us today. JP Morgan, stalwart Episcopalian who helped to start the Clergy Pension Fund, was involved in a buyout to ensure financial stability. It involved US Steel buying those slave mines in Birmingham. Three weeks later, the new president of that mining operation signed a contract for 400 more convict-slaves.

Atlanta has a similar story, with mines, and brickworks, and industrialized farms that operated with slave labor around the year 1900. An operation controlled by Fourth National Bank of Atlanta was the primary beneficiary, a firm eventually subsumed in Wachovia Bank Company. In 1896 that bank's owners drove over 1200 convict laborers, representing nearly 40% of Georgia's available prison labor pool. Wachovia, however, has done some investigation into its own history and significant reparative work in recent years.

Through all of this, there was almost no federal oversight, investigation, or intervention. There was a small foray by a federal prosecutor named Reese in Montgomery in 1902, under Teddy Roosevelt. He had very limited success in prosecuting what were called peonage cases (debt-slavery), mostly because juries didn't have the stomach to convict their fellow townsmen. Repeated requests to federal officials for assistance were almost universally ignored. Ignored, that is, until World War II began.

Nazi Germany and imperial Japan actually helped to end this atrocity. Propaganda from the enemy sought to convince African Americans that their lot would be better with nations who took their humanity seriously. Only then did federal officials begin to worry about the stain on this nation.

Well, my friends, that stain has spread far and wide. It was the rare privileged person of faith who was able to see the sin of chattel slavery, in either North or South, before the Civil War. It was even rarer for a church member to speak out against that inhumanity or work to end it. Rare as well to work against Jim Crow. Nor have we yet truly begun to teach our children about the sins of this nation: enslavement of Native Americans by early colonists; northern involvement in the African slave trade; the wretched excesses of plantation slavery; or the institutionalized criminalization of black life in the south after the Civil War. We have hardly begun to look at the realities of our heritage. All of our clergy participate in a pension system begun by one who benefited from slavery. Trinity Church, Wall Street, had slaves on its farms in New York in the 1700s. There were at one time slaves at Virginia Seminary -- working, not attending classes - and that diocese reports that in 1860, more than 80% of their clergy owned slaves.

The consequences continue to this day. Most of us, white and black, put our money in banks whose history is in some way connected to profits made from slave labor. Most of us benefit from steel made by companies with some connection to those slave-driven mines of the industrializing south. Most of us expect to live in communities made safer by law enforcement and prisons.

Who is in those prisons? I would suggest to you that the grossly inappropriate racial balance in our prisons today is partly the result of criminalizing most parts of black life in the south, from the 1880s well up until the 1960s. The difficulties for the inner city black families today also have something to do with centuries of removing black men from their families, to serve as slave labor in somebody else's field, or mine, or factory.

Through it all, people of privilege looked the other way, and too few found the courage to question inhuman ideas, words, practices, or laws. We and they ignored the image of Christ in our neighbors. We colluded with businesses and industries that sought only the greatest profit, made on the backs of forced labor. That search for profit at all costs is not just greed but idolatry, and we are being reminded of its consequences in our own day.

Yet there is hope. Against all rational possibility, there is hope. The slave chaplains in Ghana began a journey of faith that eventually resulted in prophets and witnesses like WEB Du Bois (who began life in an Episcopal Sunday school), Sojourner Truth, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dr. King, as well as our latter-day prophets, like Barbara Harris, Ed Rodman, Martini Shaw, Thomas Logan, C. David Williams and so many here today. Profiteers and owners may have intended to use the gospel to control, but God used it to set the captives free, eventually. There is no limiting the power and love of God to transcend the death and evil of this life. Yet we will not experience the full resurrection until the whole body of Christ rises again.

We're going to go out from this place today, remembering that great vision of God for a restored creation, where all humanity lives together in dignity, with justice and peace, whether black or white, Hispanic or Chinese, woman, man, gay, straight, enemy or friend. We're going to leave this place today knowing that that great vision of liberation, redemption, and healing is indeed possible, if we join in. It's going to take the utter commitment and labor of all those who have freely chosen the yoke of Christ, whose service is perfect freedom -- freedom for all humanity. We are recommitting ourselves to that service. When we do, we can once more lift our heads and rightly say, "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."