

Day of Repentance: The Episcopal Church Apologizes for Slavery

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, October 5, 2008.

At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus goes to his hometown Nazareth. In some ways, Nazareth is a lot like our society today: housing rich and poor, in-crowds and outcasts, powerful and powerless. When he goes to the synagogue, he holds up a picture of another society, what he calls "the Kingdom of God." It is the society that Isaiah sings about, that Jesus lived out all the way to the cross, and that we now profess as Christians.

At the beginning of the Church's history, the Church sought to promote that Kingdom. This was its charge - to further the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed, to transform the world around them into a world founded on the rule of God. This almost-subversive goal gave the Church an inherently counter-cultural character that called it to renounce the powers that work against God. In the centuries since then, the Church has sometimes still opposed the ruling powers around it, but sometimes it has fitted in comfortably with those powers and even benefited from them.

So the Church has a legacy, a story that we have inherited, of how we have dealt with the world around us. Today The Episcopal Church has promised to look at an especially painful part of that story - the Church's involvement in slavery - and to hold up that picture against the promise of the Kingdom of God. An open and honest look at ourselves is not an easy thing to do. We prefer to hide the hard stuff, or to deny it, sometimes for self-protection but sometimes out of self-interest. One effective way for a society - or its dominant group - to maintain the status quo and their power is by controlling the stories and the memories of the society. Our history books are written by the winners of society, the victors, and tell their stories. Stories from the point of view of the peasants, the losers, and the vanquished are rarely told. The ruling powers can make the "other" invisible by silencing their voices, denying their experiences, and maintaining the status quo and the system that continues to make the "other" other.

Today the Episcopal Church promises to listen to the other stories. At the 2006 General Convention, the church called for a "Day of Repentance and Reconciliation," allowing the whole church to apologize publicly for its involvement in the institution and support of transatlantic slavery.

I speak to you now as an anti-racism trainer for the Episcopal Church. I want to tell you first what this day is not. It is not a guilt trip. It is not what somebody told me he feared: white-bashing. It is not about creating division and resentment, pitting "us" against "them," blacks against whites. Finally, it is not an attack on you personally. I say these things right from the start, because nothing will make you stop listening faster than the fear that I will bait you.

Here is what this Day of Repentance IS about. It means that we, the Episcopal Church, face the truth - that we have been part of upholding slavery even if we don't want to hear about it. It means that we repent of this sin - and remember that "repent"

comes from the Greek *metanoia* which means not “abject guilt” but “turn around.” Repentance is an orientation, not a feeling. When we repent of our role in supporting slavery, we turn our orientation around, from that sinful way to God’s way. It means that we take a critical look at the system and the culture that formed us as a nation and as a church, and learn how our attitudes toward a large class of people became ingrained into our national and ecclesial character. And finally, it means that we look at the legacy of our slave society, and the ways in which we are still beneficiaries of that slave trade. So let me tell you just a few things about the Episcopal Church that are missing from our history books.

The Episcopal Church mirrored post-Revolutionary War society in many ways, not the least of which was the make-up of its leadership. We include as one of our most famous Episcopalians George Washington who, by the way, was a slaveholder. Many of our early leaders, including bishops, were slaveholders. A number of churches benefited materially from the slave trade, from the slave labor used to build the buildings to the donations made to those churches by slaveholders. The Episcopal Church did not denounce slavery and so tacitly supported its existence. In fact, the Church as a political body looked at the possibility of a church split on the issue of abolition, and chose church unity over church integrity. The leaders argued that slavery was a purely political question and so beyond the Church’s concern. When slavery was abolished, the church continued to enslave the African Americans spiritually by refusing to ordain, refusing to let the people sit in the main body of the church, and refusing African Americans the dignity and respect that was theirs as children of God.

“But what does this have to do with me?” you ask. Here’s what. As Episcopalians, we belong to a church that in its ignorance, or blindness, or willfulness, supported a sinful system that demeaned and brutalized a whole people. We inherit a system with a legacy not unlike the Egypt from which God liberated the Israelites. We need to acknowledge that truth. We might argue that back then, people in the Episcopal Church, just like people in society at large, did not know that slavery and human bondage was a sin, that it was taken for granted as just “part of the way things are,” or even that the Bible justified its existence. That argument, which is a familiar one, should give us pause. An argument justifying slavery or other demeaning treatment of people using the Bible as backup should warn us to be careful about how we read and interpret Scripture. Holy Scripture says over and over again that God tells us to love our neighbor, to care for the poor, to welcome the marginalized and the outcast, to liberate the oppressed, and to heal the sick and the brokenhearted. One lesson of the Episcopal Church’s history is that we need to open our eyes and look around. Are there ways in which we, in our ignorance or blindness or willfulness, support injustice?

God created each of us in love and calls us to be faithful to the love of God. Part of answering God’s call means making a commitment to living in accordance with the nature of God as God is revealed to us in the Bible, and especially in Jesus Christ— a God of compassion, righteousness, justice, and peace. When we are called to be followers, then, we are called to honor these values even when the world around us does not. It would be naïve to believe that we can be faithful Christians if we do not stand up for

Christ, or if we keep silent in the face of evil. But we, the Episcopal Church, failed to be Christ's face to the world; we kept silent. When we acknowledge this failure in our common history, we may better see the present wounds and begin to heal.

We have come a long way. We promise in our Baptismal Covenant to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." We are committed, especially here in Christ Church Cathedral, to ministries of social justice, inclusiveness, and reconciliation. But we are not finished. Keep your eye on the other reality—the Kingdom of God. When we repent—turn around—and ask for God's grace and forgiveness for the sins of slavery, segregation, discrimination, and racism, we begin living into that reality, and in doing so, we fulfill that promise of Isaiah and Jesus.

So, in this spirit of faithfulness to God and integrity to our life in Christ, and on behalf of the Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church as the Body of Christ expresses its profound apology for what the Church has done in supporting slavery, segregation, discrimination, and racism. Like Pharaoh of old, we hardened our hearts to the suffering of our African American brothers and sisters. Unlike the God of Moses, although we observed the misery of God's people in bondage, we failed to listen to their cry. To all of you who are or have been victims of the sin of racism, we apologize and ask forgiveness for the wrongs that we have done to you and to your ancestors. And we ask that you walk with us as we seek to break down the walls that separate us, to build up the bonds of love among us, and to unite in our common work to bring the Kingdom of God to this earth. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Redeemer. Amen.