

*Sermons from the sermon series
“400 years of Africans in America”*



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July 28, 2019

“Slaves Arriving”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens, Senior Minister

August 4, 2019

“Reconstruction and Deconstruction”

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August 11, 2019

“Resistance”

Anthony Brown, Sabbatical Associate Minister

August 18, 2019

“The Economics of Injustice”

The Rev. Amanda Conley, Guest Minister

August 25, 2019

“Women Rising”

The Rev. Dr. Renee Wormack-Keels, Guest Minister

September 1, 2019

“Reparations”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens, Senior Minister

“Slaves Arriving”

*Part I of VI in the sermon series
“400 years of Africans in America”*

Jeremiah 31:15

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

July 28, 2019

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 28, 2019, Pentecost Seven, Proper 12, dedicated to the more than 12.5 million African men, women, and children who were brought to North and South America as slaves, to the 10 million souls who died in transport, to William Owen who passed to eternal life on July 17 and to Emerson Leigh Marker on her baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

“Slaves Arriving”

“A Voice is heard in Ramah. Lamentations and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.”

Jeremiah 31:15

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Antonio and Isabella came to America on August 25, 1619.

They landed at Point Comfort (now Fort Monroe), in the settlement that would become Virginia. They arrived on the English Privateer ship, the White Lion. They were among the “20 and odd” Africans (as it was recorded) who had been captured from the slave ship San Juan Bautista in a fierce battle in the Bay of Campeche in the Gulf of Mexico. Along with the White Lion, the English privateer ship, the Treasurer, also took enslaved Africans north to the colonies arriving a few days later.

Antonio and Isabella and the other Africans who arrived that day in August 1619 were slaves. This was not Ellis Island. This was not Plymouth Rock. These were not free men and women landing in the new world filled with hope and ready to begin their adventure in freedom and exploration.

They were arriving in exploitation. They were called human cargo. They had been captured in Kabasa, in the Angolan region of Africa, chained and then sold as part of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. While the Portuguese had started taking and selling slaves from Africa in the late 16th Century, it had not reached the colonies until that August day. Over the next 246 years, the slave population in the United States would

grow to over 3.9 million by the 1860 Census. There were also another 500,000 free blacks in America by 1860.

By the outbreak of the Civil War, 57% of the population of South Carolina were slaves. In Mississippi, 55% were slaves. In Louisiana, 47%; in Alabama, 45%; in Georgia and Florida, 44%. In terms of absolute numbers, Virginia had the most slaves with 490,865. Across the south, by the outbreak of the Civil War, 33% of the total population were African Americans and 98% of them were slaves.

For those who argue that slavery was not the cause of the Civil War, I always say "*follow the color of money.*" All the Confederate paper currency had pictures of happy slaves picking cotton, serving their masters in the big house, and dancing for joy around campfires. If the economics of slavery didn't matter, why did war start in South Carolina, the state with the most slaves, and the first seven states to secede were the ones I just mentioned? The painful and evil truth of the economics of slavery meant that the men and women pictured on the money would never see a penny of it.

And now we live in a nation where the first American currency intended to right the wrong of exploitation with the picture of Harriet Tubman, leader and liberator in the Underground

Railroad movement, who was scheduled to replace the face of proud slave president Andrew Jackson on the \$20 is put off until 2025 by the current administration. Following the color of money is not just an old truth, it still holds sway today.

The first generation of slaves arriving, along with Isabella and Antonio, were Africans captured and brought to Virginia from the villages of Kabasa in Angola (as mentioned) and Ndongo, Kongo. Those first enslaved Africans were skilled farmers, herders, blacksmiths and artisans. They had the perfect skill set needed for the colonies to survive. Along with their culture, they also brought many ideas and innovations including floodways, crop cultivation, music and dance. It was their unbridled spirit and labor that helped build Hampton, Fort Monroe, America, and the White House, but they toiled through many generations of unpaid bondage servitude, civil unrest, and the march for civil rights, before their descendants became legal citizens.

Those first “20 and odd” enslaved Africans who arrived at Point Comfort marked the beginning of 246 years of unpaid servitude. For the first two generations from 1619 until 1661 some of the enslaved Africans were granted their freedom and in some cases were able to purchase the freedom of their relatives, start their own homesteads, and employ indentured

servants. Yet others were held in bondage for life or until 1661 when Virginia established a law legalizing lifelong servitude of all un-free Africans. Other colonies followed Virginia's example and established laws in the early 1700s which legalized lifelong servitude of ALL un-free Africans. There was seemingly no way out of slavery except escape or death.

Slavery is an indelible stain on America's soul. Slavery is our nation's original sin. While our nation was not the first and will not be the last to enslave others, the African slave trade which chained and packed 12.5 million people on ships much too small to safely hold such loads, cost the lives of 20% of those packed below deck for centuries. The bones of the dead, 2.5 million or more, are on the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. If the ocean were dredged, you could find your way from the west coast of Africa to the Caribbean and the East Coast of the United States by following the trail of bones. (*I had this number flipped in my Reflections on Friday.*)

Slavery is the worst human transgression perpetrated by one human being on another – whether in 1619 or 2019. In his book, *Adventures of an African Slaver*, published in 1854, Captain Theodore Canot wrote:

*I have no hesitation in sayings that three-fourths of the slaves sent abroad from Africa are the fruit of wars fomented by the avarice of (white people). We stimulate the negro's passions by the introduction of wants and fancies never dreamed of by the simple native, while slavery (in Africa) was an institution of domestic need and custom alone. But what was once a luxury has now ripened into an absolute necessity; so that **man**, in truth has become the coin of Africa.*

Canot goes on to describe the packing of people on the ships that he commanded:

As I crawled between decks, I could not imagine how this little army was to be packed or draw breath in a hold but twenty-two inches high! We made them lie down in each other's laps, like sardines in a can, and this way obtained space for the entire cargo.

Elsewhere he writes in the chronicles of his role in this evil institution:

"We created conditions for a smallpox epidemic aboard the ship. At length death was satisfied but not until 800 beings we had shipped in high health had dwindled to 497 skeletons."

In time, Isabella and Antonio were among the few slaves across the generations who were able to stay together. They had a son, William. William was the first child of African ancestry we know was born in America. William was baptized on January 4, 1624. From William, the generations of slaves born on our soil extends through history. Most of them, like William and Emerson today, were baptized Christians. Slavery was justified and rationalized in the name of Jesus in the heinous twists and turns of theology and history. Fortunately, there were churches like ours, who on September 26, 1852 said, we as America Christians can no longer abide in the connections between slavery and our faith – setting out as Abolitionist Christians and leaders in Ohio’s underground Railroad movement. Thanks be to God for our ancestors in faith here at First Church!

The sin of slavery and the deep and abiding effects of this original American sin are a stain on our soul as a nation. As I was preparing this first sermon today, the words of the prophet Jeremiah 31:15 kept haunting me. *“A Voice is heard in Ramah. Lamentations and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.”*

I kept seeing the faces of mothers of Isabella and Antonio (obviously not their native Angolan names) weeping hysterically on the beaches of Angola watching their son and daughter sail away in chains, their lives stolen from them, their freedom stolen from them. I can see them refusing to be comforted for their lost children, because “they are no more.” My heart breaks over and over and over again as I see this trauma induced millions of times over the hundreds of years that ensue. Mothers giving birth to babies who are taken from them and sold to God knows who and only God knows where— carried away from them forever. I have no capacity whatsoever to conceive of this and hold this image in my heart and mind. This is the root of evil writ large. It is also the root of outrage, pain, trauma, distress and struggle of 400 years of Africans in America.

Through it all, the descendants of Antonio, Isabella and William have endured with dignity the cruelest barbaric acts of enslavement. They have endured through the Jim Crow era, segregation, and the disparity of basic human rights.

But, the chains of slavery have not gone away.

The chains of slavery have now become the unfair prison sentences for minor crimes where other ethnic groups receive

less or no prison time. The chains of slavery have now become racial profiling where you can get stopped merely because of the color of your skin or arrested for a crime you did not commit. The chains of slavery are now the disparity of young Brown and Black people not being able to get a quality education or a job because of the socioeconomic, financial conditions of their living environment. The chains of slavery are now people being moved out of urban communities because of gentrification. The chains of slavery are young Black and Brown girls being captured and forced into human trafficking and the sex slave industry. The chains of slavery are young people hooked on crack; heroin and opioids as a way to deal with the deck of cards they have been dealt. When will it **all end?**

The Transatlantic slave trade, just like the systematic elimination of the Native American Indian in the United States, and the Holocaust of the Jews and those challenging Nazi Germany are human tragedies and mammoth acts of inhumanity that changed the world. We cannot change history or the impact that it had on past generations. But we should always recognize and learn from the perils and transgressions of humankind's inhumanity against one another. And while we must fully acknowledge, lament, mourn and grieve the history of African Americans and the experience filled with too much

tragedy that has shaped black experience in America, we also need to ALWAYS remember this is not the whole story of African American history.

African Americans have contributed to the economic, academic, social, cultural and moral well-being of this nation. Without African Americans, some of America's crowning achievements would never have been possible. Would American moral leadership be as strong without Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr. or Thurgood Marshall? Would American literature be as prolific without the giants of the Harlem Renaissance and the writers and poets of our generation? Would American music have conquered the world without pioneers like Robert Johnson, Louis Armstrong, Marian Anderson and James Brown? Could we claim America as the most innovative nation on earth without the [invention of the modern traffic light](#), the perfection of the [carbon filament](#) or the [use of the mathematics that propelled *Apollo* astronauts to the moon](#)? – to name only a few inventions. In government, law, science, industry, education and more, African Americans have given us tremendous leadership in this country.

African American culture is American culture, and African American discoveries are American discoveries. Without the

accomplishments of African Americans, the United States could not boast the ingenuity and cultural richness that we cherish. As we contemplate the challenges and injustices that African Americans still face, we remember the tragic way in which African American history began and draw inspiration from the heroes and trailblazers who fought under our country's principle that all people are created equal. These heroes and trailblazers, along with the millions of African Americans who have worked, created, invented, discovered, lived, aged and died over the past 400 years, have molded our national character such that the United States would be unrecognizable and, indeed, lesser without their cumulative presence.

In the next five Sundays, we will hear from the prophetic voices of African American preachers in our pulpit. We will grow in our faith and we will remember – Isabella, Antonio, William and the millions who came as slaves and rose through the tears and the pain to challenge and change the face and the faith of this nation forever. Amen.

“Reconstruction and Deconstruction”

*Part II of VI in the sermon series
“400 years of Africans in America”*

*Ecclesiastes 1;2, 12-14, 2:18-23; Colossians 3:1-11,
Luke 12:13-21*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

August 4, 2019

From the Pulpit

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A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 4, 2019, Pentecost 8, Proper 13, dedicated to the memory of Alonso Jacob Ransier and all the men and women who made strides forward during Reconstruction in the South and North, to my grandsons Benton and Rylan, to the memory of Helen Wilson who passed to eternal life and brought such joy to this world, to the 30 dead in 13 hours in El Paso and Dayton and to the 50 wounded and always to the glory of God!

“Reconstruction and Deconstruction”

Ecclesiastes 1;2, 12-14, 2:18-23; Colossians 3:1-11;

Luke 12:13-21

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Alonso Jacob Ransier was an exceptional man. Born free and Black as a son of Haitian immigrants in Charleston, SC in 1834, Alonzo rose to become a State Senator, Lt. Governor, and among the first four Black Congressmen from South Carolina while serving his state and nation as a conservative Republican from the mid-1860s through the 1870s. He was instrumental in establishing and leading the Republican Party in South Carolina during these formative years following the end of the Civil War. Alonzo was known for his fairness, honesty, integrity, civility, conservative values, and determination to bring racial equality to his state and nation. With his foundation as a Political conservative, he was also a Civil Rights Activist. He offered legislation in South Carolina legislature to strike down all references in all state laws and documents separating whites and blacks. His legislation never passed.

In 1874, Alonzo pressed hard in Congress to pass our nation's Civil Rights Act and offered a key and final vote in Congress as it passed on February 5, 1875. His term ended when he was rebuffed by the Republican Party to whom he had been faithful and helped establish and lost his congressional nomination to Charles Buttz, a white Republican in May 1875. Although he served some time as the Internal Revenue Collector for the Second Congressional District, he was replaced in that position

as well by a white man. When Alonso died on August 17, 1882, he died impoverished as a day laborer for the city of Charleston leaving behind 11 children.

Congressman Ransier's story of rising and shining and then having his rising star extinguished in the years following the Civil War is a story which is all too familiar during the time of Reconstruction in the United States. For a window of 14 years, from 1863 (with President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863) through 1877, there was hope for the 4 million men, women, and children who were slaves or who had been enslaved. But these years were also riddled with violence, riots, and massacres of Black Americans across the nation, the rise of the Klu Klux Klan and lynching throughout the South, and the granting of civil rights and the almost immediate ending of those rights to voting, work, land, political opportunity for those who had been slaves.

During this time of the rising sun in the south, 4 million people were given new hope, new life, and very few resources to make it all happen. With the end of the Civil War on April 9th and the assassination of President Lincoln on April 14th/15th, the nation was left in the hands of a Democratic from Tennessee, Andrew Johnson, our 17th President. His policies and practices ran counter to Lincoln's and he favored

the South being allowed to set its own course for Reconstruction and offered no protection or support for former slaves. He was opposed mightily for his regressive practices and was impeached by the House while Senate fell one vote short of ending his term. He was only a one term President.

These years in American History were tumultuous to say the least. On the bright side, with the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, slavery was ended, citizenship to former slaves was granted, and the right to vote for Black men was ratified February 3, 1870 (although -as we all know – our women’s right to vote was not granted until the 19th Amendment ratified August 18, 1920- 50 years later!). Colleges were opening across the south for former slaves and elections guaranteed representation for Blacks for the first time ever.

Our own Congregationalist forebearers formed the American Missionary Association (AMA) in 1846 with the explicit purpose of abolishing slavery, educating African Americans, promoting racial equality, and spreading Christian values. By 1861, we had established camps in the south for former slaves. The AMA played a major role in Reconstruction as the we founded more than 500 schools and in so doing, we spent

more mission dollars on teaching free blacks than the entire money set aside by the federal government for doing the same thing. We founded 11 colleges – Berea College (where our own beloved Mac Anderson served on the Board of Directors), Atlanta University (home to WEB DuBois), Fisk University (where one alum was our late-beloved Nell Cole and where Dr. Gladden served on the Board of Directors), Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), Tougaloo College, Dillard University, Talladega College, LeMoyne-Owen College, Huston-Tillotson University, Avery Normal Institute (now part of the College of Charleston), and together with the Freedman’s Bureau, Howard University in Washington DC.

During Reconstruction, the AMA grew to serve free blacks across the nation. As Reconstruction turned into deconstruction, the work of the AMA turned to face racism, inequality, and mistreatment of Blacks across our nation. I believe the AMA is one the greatest movements in our denomination’s history – a story that is relatively untold to this day. We represented the brightest lights of reconstruction – in my belief.

But the bright side of Reconstruction was not too bright and not long lasting. Like Alonso Ransier, Black men and women who ascended and led their communities in remarkable new

ways were treated poorly by their white neighbors – they were run off the land, and often threatened, attacked, tortured and lynched.

The KKK lynched close to 5,000 Black men and women between the 1870s- and 1950s. Many of those whose lives were taken were killed because they were successful farmers, businessmen, community leaders, and more. Lynching took the lives of too many of the best and the brightest African American stars on the landscape of America. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama tells each of these stories so that we never forget our sisters and brothers who were tortured unto death. They have gathered soil from each place we know the blood of these men and women stained the earth. And just as we know the place where Jesus was crucified, the memory of the actual lynching trees remains in each community where Black people were executed through the years. Black and white know where all the lynching trees are.

In his book *“The Cross and the Lynching Tree,”* the late (great) author of Black Liberation theology Dr. James Cone writes, *“The conspicuous absence of the lynching tree in America theological discourse and preaching is profoundly revealing,*

especially since the crucifixion (of Jesus Christ) was clearly a first-century lynching.”

Dr. James Cone goes on to say, “The cross can heal and it can hurt; it can be empowering and liberating but also can be enslaving and oppressive. There is no one way in which the cross can be interpreted. I offer my reflections because I believe the cross placed alongside the lynching tree can help us see Jesus in America in a new light, and thereby empower people who claim to follow him to take a stand against white supremacy and every kind of injustice.”

The absolute end of Reconstruction came with the extremely questionable election of Rutherford B. Hayes as President in the Compromise of 1877. Hayes lost the popular vote to Samuel Tilden by 250,000 votes (the equivalent of 3,000,000 in today’s terms). The Congress granted 19 undecided electoral votes to Hayes so that he won the electoral college by 185-184. In exchange for these 19 votes President Rutherford B. Hayes pulled all of the Union troops out of the South which proved to be the last military obstacle to the reestablishment of white supremacy. All historians mark 1877 as the end of Reconstruction and what I call the beginning of deconstruction.

With the deconstruction came laws which strangled the progress made through the 1870s. Laws were changed back to pre-civil war – challenging the three new constitutional amendments. By 1900 all the states who seceded at the time of the Civil War, had rewritten their state constitutions and statutes to disenfranchise and segregate all Blacks in the south. While not written in law in the North, the counterpart in racist thought and practice was there as well. Red-lining, policies against loans for Blacks to buy homes, economic and educational segregation and increasing arrests and imprisonment of Black people was rampant in the North and the South. It wasn't until the Second Reconstruction, or the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s that a movement for change began to force our nation to deal with our unresolved and unequal laws and practices. And even now, as we are in our Third Reconstruction, dealing with the fallout from the racists policies and practices following the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s, are we being forced to examine the full force of prejudice and racism.

Reconstruction and deconstruction have deeply shaped the face of America. This is a story we should all know well as we struggle today with racism and prejudice in America.

There is so much more to say. But I will end with this story. Ten years ago, I was in Brooklyn, NY at the MAAFA as the preacher and keynote speaker for this amazing week of witness and testimony. MAAFA is the Kiswahili term for the “terrible suffering” or “great disaster.” It is what I call the Black Holocaust – when millions of Africans died during the journey of captivity from the west coast of Africa to the shores of America. Each year, thousands of people gather to remember the MAAFA in September at St Paul’s Baptist Church in Brooklyn.

I was sitting with Dr. James Cone (whom I quoted earlier), as together we watched the three-hour musical telling of this tragic story – which began on the shores of west Africa and came up to the present moment.

As we sat together, I felt his shoulders moving during the production. I looked over and found him weeping. I offered him the handkerchief I had with me. He thanked me for my kindness. As he wiped away his tears, he said to me, *“There is so much pain in our story. Sometimes, I just can’t take it all in. Sometimes, I just can’t hold it anymore.”* I took his hand. Then, I began to cry, we embraced.

As in the story of Alonzo and millions of others, there is so much pain in this story, it is hard to take it all in. For those who suffer the MAAFA, the “terrible suffering” of this story, my heart breaks. I am so sorry. I am so sorry.

As we come to the table of grace today, I ask that we breathe in, breathe deep and try to hold the terrible suffering of this story in our hearts and minds. As we step forward, I pray that we come as sisters and brothers who are making a new way. I pray that grace will lead us to Christ’s table and I pray that grace will lead us home. Amen.

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“Resistance”

*Part III of VI in the sermon series
“400 years of Africans in America”*

Luke 12:32-40

Anthony Brown
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August 11, 2019

From the Pulpit

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I would like to share a narrative of resistance that doesn't involve or lead to violence or warring. I want to share with you my struggle as I reflected and prepared for this conversation on resistance. I think we sometimes overlook what all resistance can be, especially when it comes to resistance in relation to historic and present-day racial tensions. I researched online and found books, but most often found a contentious, vicious portrayal of resistance to slavery. This picture of resistance is one that doesn't lead me, and I imagine many, toward finding peace and reconciliation together. Rebellion, running away, and "softer" day-to-day acts of microaggressions can dominate the portrayal of resistance and this dominance consequently heavily influences today's means for resisting. When "fight or flight" is the dominant image of resistance, it's no wonder we know groups of peoples who have been and are at odds end here in America. Can resistance be something more- something more constructive and humane, something more meaningful?

“Resistance”

Luke 12:32-40

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God of justice, your word is light and truth. Let your face shine on us to restore us, that we may walk in your way, seeking justice and doing good. Amen.

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Today, I’m going to follow in Tim’s footsteps and hopefully share with you a story you haven’t heard yet. This story is of Saint Walatta Petros. This is an important story that needs to be shared. It’s not only the narrative of Walatta Petros’ life, but is the earliest known biography of an African woman, and an early account of resistance to European protocolonialism from an African perspective. Walatta Petros is a rare look at African women’s domestic lives and relationships with other women.

Walatta Petros might seem to be unique. She is, after all, a literate seventeenth- century African noblewoman. She was an important leader, directing a successful movement against

Europeans and overcoming local male leadership. Her Ethiopian disciples wrote a book about her called *The Life and Struggles of our Mother Walatta Petros*. Yet, closer examination reveals that Walatta Petros is not unique, but rather an exemplary case.

Many are surprised to hear that Africans were writing any books several hundred years ago, much less books in an African language about an individual woman. The general public assumes that ancient, medieval, and early modern Africans did not create written texts, and even scholars may assume that the publication of Chinua Achebe's novel "Things Fall Apart" in 1958 represents the genesis of written African literature. Yet, Ethiopia and Eritrea are nations in East Africa whose African peoples, the Ḥabasas, have been reading and writing bound manuscripts in their literary language of Ge'ez since the fourth century CE.

Many of us are also surprised to hear that Africans were Christians well before the 1600s, assuming that Christianity in Africa is always the result of western missionary activity. Yet the Ḥabasas are among the oldest Christians in the world—King Ezana and his court converted in the 330s CE. The Ḥabasa practice is a form of African Christianity that predates many forms of European Christianity and is variously called

non-Chalcedonian, monophysite, Coptic, Oriental Orthodox, or Ethiopian Orthodox. Members themselves prefer the term Tawaḥedo Church. Their ancient form of African Christianity is distinctive, holding some beliefs dear that are considered heretical by the Roman Catholic Church, Protestant churches, and Eastern Orthodoxy.

The Walatta Petros narrative is written without a western audience in mind. Its Ḥabasa authorship assumes a contemporary Ḥabasa readership; that is, those as knowledgeable about its events, people, places, books, time, and rituals as the authors are. Maybe for this reason alone, western minds are in need of it.

Saint Walatta Petros lived in the early 17th century and is one of thirty female saints in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawaḥedo Church and one of only six of these women saints with hagiographies. She was a religious and monastic leader who led a nonviolent revolt against Roman Catholicism, defending the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawaḥedo Church when the Jesuits persuaded King Susenyos to proclaim Roman Catholicism the faith of the land. Her name, Walatta Petros means “daughter of St. Peter.” Her followers wrote down the story of her life about thirty years after she died in 1672. She was born in 1592 into a noble family, her mother was named Krestos Ebaya (“In Christ lies her greatness”) and her father was named Baḥer

Saggad (“The regions by the sea submits to him”). Her father adored her, treating her with great reverence and predicting that bishops and kings would bow down to her, giving her the name of the man upon whom God built his church, Peter.

Walatta Petros was married at a young age to King Susenyos’s chief advisor, Malke’a Krestos (“Image of Christ”). After all three of her children died in infancy, she grew tired of the things of this world and determined to leave her husband to become a nun. Not long after, in 1612, Susenyos privately converted from the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawaḥedo Church to Roman Catholicism, and over the next ten years, he urged those in his court, including her, to convert as well, finally delivering an edict banning their own orthodoxy in 1622. When Walatta Petros first left her husband, around 1615, he razed a town to retrieve her and she returned to him so that more people would not be harmed. Then she discovered that her husband had been involved in the murder of the head of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawaḥedo Church and she again determined to leave her husband, starving herself until he let her go. She immediately went to a monastery on Lake Ṭana and became a nun at the age of 25, in 1617. There she met, for the first time, Eheta Krestos, the woman who became her constant companion in life and work.

Walatta Petros lived quietly as a devout and hard-working nun and might have remained as such if the king had not banned orthodoxy. Her hagiographer reported that she did not want to keep company with any of the converts, so she took several nuns and servants and led her companions 100 miles east of Lake Tana to the district of Şeyat. There she began to preach against Roman Catholicism, adding that any king who had converted was an apostate and accursed. The king soon heard of these treasonous remarks and demanded she be brought before the court. Her husband and powerful family came to her defense, and so she was not killed, but was sent to live with her brother in around 1625, on the condition that she stop her teaching.

However, she soon fled him, taking the same nuns and servants, and moved from Lake Tana to the region of Waldebba, about 150 miles north, which was then drawing many monks and nuns who refused to convert and were fomenting against the new religion. While there, Walatta Petros had a vision of Christ commissioning her to found seven religious communities, a charge she only reluctantly took up. She left and went to the region of Şallamt, east of Waldebba, and again began preaching against conversion. The angry king again called her before the court, and this time she was sentenced to spending Saturdays with the Jesuits, as the head of

the mission, Afonso Mendes, worked to convert her. I continue to wonder what this moment was like, when on Saturdays, the Jesuits were together with Walatta Petros working through the day. I can imagine the Jesuits sitting at a grand table with Walatta Petros and her followers, learning and getting to know one another. Perhaps they fought over whose faith was more “right.” Maybe they were defensive and namebashed one another. Maybe as the Saturdays came and went, the Jesuits and Habasas learned more about themselves, and learned something concerning life they had not known.

Ultimately, sentencing Walatta Petros to spending Saturdays with the Jesuits in hopes to convert her was unsuccessful. The king banishes her, alone, to the Ethio-Sudan borderlands, to a place called Zabay, a hot and barren place. There she endured many hardships, but many monks and nuns who did not want to convert found her and became members of her community. Due to the kindness of the queen, Eheta Krestos was allowed to join her. Thus, Zabay was the first of the seven communities prophesied. After three years the king relented his sentencing and Walatta Petros went with her followers to live in the region of Dambeya, on the northern side of Lake Tana, setting up her second community, named Canq’wa. More men and women followed her there, and when sickness broke out, she moved

her followers to Məşelle, on the southeastern shore, becoming her third community.

Finally, in 1632, fifteen years after Walatta Petros had become a nun, a disheartened Susenyos rescinded the conversion edict and died just a few months later. Walatta Petros was revered as a heroine for her resistance to early European incursions in Africa. For the next ten years, Walatta Petros's community continued to grow and the next king, Fasiladas, looked on her with great favor. She set up her communities at Damboza, Afar Faras, Zage, and Zabol. Then, after a three-month illness, she died, twenty-six years after she had become a nun, and was buried at the monastery on Lake Tana.

In 1650, Fasiladas gave land to establish her monastery at Q'araşa, on Lake Tana, which remains her monastery today. Walatta Petros's fame continued to grow over the next century, and her monastery became an important sanctuary for those fleeing the wrath of the king, for whom she performed many miracles, as recorded in her hagiography.

Walatta Petros and her demonstration of resistance was neither fight nor flight. She was resilient and her's was a demonstration of intervention during a time of conflict. She provided a great people in need sanctuary when their livelihood was a stake. In

Walatta Petros' response to conflict, she did not stir or invite violence. When people's lives were in danger, when the king demanded she come to him so that he can eliminate the threat, she came and was willing to sacrifice herself. This daughter of St. Peter paints for us a pathway to peaceful, non-violent reconciliation, where dignity and honor might be restored. The life and work of Walatta Petros sets the stage for today's peoples who desire to resist in a life-giving and -sustaining manner. Her means of resistance is one that gives life to the likes of STAR, *Strategies for Traumatic Awareness and Resilience*.

STAR emerged in the aftermath of 9/11. In the wake of the attacks, Church World Service provided a grant to Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP) to support community leaders dealing with impacted communities. This Center is home to educational programs that prepare leaders to transform violence and injustice. Rather than providing direct services for those who have experienced violence, the program is created to educate community leaders about trauma caused by collective violence. Nearly twenty years later, STAR has worked with people from more than 60 countries and conducted trainings in more than 20 countries. It's interesting that STAR doesn't use resistance in its language. STAR is built on resilience and defines it as 'the capacity of individuals and communities to adapt, survive and bounce

back in the midst of, or after, hardship and adversity. STAR searches for evidence of resilience, not in the absence of traumatic response, but in the quality of relationships with self, other individuals, families and communities in the wake, or midst, of traumagenic events. STAR aims to create and sustain a decolonised, welcoming, inclusive environment for all kinds of spiritual practice, while acknowledging current and historical traumas intertwined with religion and spirituality.

STAR makes it possible for people today like Sharon Morgan and Tom DeWolf to meet and journey together. Sharon is a black woman from Chicago's south side who avoids white people. They scare her. Despite her trepidation, Morgan, a descendant of slaves on both sides of her family, began a journey toward racial reconciliation with DeWolf. Thomas is a white man from rural Oregon who descends from the largest slave-trading dynasty in US history. These two come from two opposing positions in the racial divide, and "Gather at the Table" in an attempt to reconcile the differences that have divided them. Over a three-year period, the two travel thousands of miles, both overseas and through twenty-seven states, visiting ancestral towns, courthouses, cemeteries, plantations, antebellum mansions, and historic sites. In the beginning of the journey, they seemed to be two squabbling adolescents, petulantly pursuing their own agendas. But the

two keep at it, leading and following, following and leading the other. They struggle together, sharing intimate truths and realities that often go unspoken. They go into countless spaces they ordinarily would never find themselves in more than hundreds of years. In their vulnerability, though, both find a shared experience that each of us share. A common ground that brings us all together.

Apart from the geographical journey that DeWolf and Morgan undertake, much of their work is spent in sharing food. It is important to both of them that each returns to the other's home base, be it with relatives or friends, to share the foods that are important to each other's cultures. I found it one of the most moving aspects of their journey: how they prepared meals for the other and made a point of being vulnerable to each other in this most fundamental way. Across the table, as bread is broken, their "enemies defences" are broken down while also ingesting the truest part of themselves and each other.

I am deeply moved by Morgan and DeWolf's journey and cannot stress enough how it affected me: I have come away, knowing for certain that if truth and reconciliation is to happen in a meaningful way, with any race, we must all gather at a common table and be prepared to listen to the other's

story; and be prepared to be changed by their story. Their journey really gives me the sense that it's not our truths that will lead to unity. Rather, it is our honesty and vulnerability that will lead us to Truth.

For hundreds of thousands of years, the fundamental directive for our species has been driven by our need to gather around the table communally to find nourishment. It is in our blood. Our DNA directs us; our psyches inform us. We are at our best, as a species, when we work toward a common goal and consume the fruits of that labour. At the Table we laugh, cry, we imagine and remember all the while gaining a greater understanding of our great need for the other. If we dare break bread and share space at the Table with our "enemies" we are allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to knowing new life. To "gather at the table" is a movement that will make all the difference in our life, we just have to show courage and bravery like that of Walatta Petros, Sharon Morgan and Tom DeWolf. This journey can be painful and ugly. It can feel as if we are being torn apart. In the end, what we share together at the table might provide us the healing nourishment we all need to live rich and full lives. Amen

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“The Economics of Injustice”

*Part IV of VI in the sermon series
“400 years of Africans in America”*

*2 Corinthians 8:14 and
Jeremiah 23:25-26*

The Rev. Amanda Conley
Guest Minister

August 18, 2019

From the Pulpit

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One of the innumerable things that I love about God, is that God is nearby, filling the earth and the heavens. No matter of this life is untouched by the Spirit and no matter of this life is outside the calling of the Body of Christ. And so, there is a word from God for our economic life, there is a churning of the Spirit towards change for economic prosperity, and there is guidance from the Son about facing the economics of injustice.

Americans, we cannot ignore the sweeping structures of institutionalized racism and economic disparities borne from slavery. The intentional structure of keeping wealth and abundance from those in the African American community is a direct affront to the word of God. **2 Corinthians 8:14** says **“at this present time your abundance being a supply for their need, so that their abundance also may become a supply for your need, that there may be equality;”** We are called by God to create a life where abundance is shared, where we take care of one another, and not privilege power, money, and wants over the needs of our neighbor.

Jeremiah 23:25-26 **I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed!" How long? Will the hearts of the prophets ever turn back--those who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart?** Dr. Darrick Hamilton executive director of the Kirwan Institute for the study of race and ethnicity at the Ohio State University discusses something we have all heard, and maybe even said ourselves: that we are all able to work hard and achieve the “American Dream.” If we are not doing well in society, we must work harder, study harder, get a good education, get a good job—then you can have equality and prosperity in America.

This narrative is a lie of false prophets. It keeps us from accepting the truths of systemic injustice and our role in

examining economic disparity. Dr. Darrick Hamilton has a lecture on YouTube (for those interested) called “Working Hard Ain’t Enough for Black Americans”—I encourage you to view; where he dismantles the lie and dives into the complex issues keeping black America in economic despair.

What are the disparities? I want to briefly share some recent facts. These first few pertain to the wealth/income gap. Facts from 2018 in Forbes:

- According to the New York Times, for every \$100 in white family wealth, black families hold just \$5.04.
- The Economic Policy Institute found that more than one in four black households have zero or negative net worth, compared to less than one in ten white families without wealth.
- The Institute for Policy Studies recent report *The Road to Zero Wealth: How the Racial Divide is Hollowing Out the America’s Middle Class (RZW)* showed that between 1983 and 2013, the wealth of the median black household declined 75 percent (from \$6,800 to \$1,700).
- At the same time, wealth for the median white household increased 14 percent from \$102,000 to \$116,800.

Brian Thompson, in this article on Forbes explains that the total economic picture for black people is still deteriorating.

- In fact, by 2020 (just next year) black households are projected to lose 18 percent more wealth.
- After that decline, the median white household will own 86 times more wealth than its black counterpart.

When exploring the wealth gap I looked into the elements that are needed to accrue wealth. It is clear through the work of many scholars that Jim Crow laws and governmental policies such as the homestead act or social security act were designed to exclude people of color. Meaning that, historically, blacks have been intentionally prevented from accruing wealth.

Allow me to share a story about a black man named Clyde Ross. Clyde was born in 1923—he and his family were from Mississippi, where growing up Clyde's parents had land and animals. Jim Crow Mississippi was a horrific place to be as a black person. Lynching was prolific and protection for blacks was non-existent. Clyde Ross's father was told he owed \$3,000 in back taxes; he could not read and he had no lawyer. The Ross family could not contest the claim and had no protection under the law. The authorities seized the land, the buggy, the animals...the family was reduced to sharecropping.

Many years later Clyde grew up, got drafted into the military, went away to fight in WWII. 1947-1961 When he came back to start his life, he went north to Chicago, found a life with wages and work, no Klansmen terrorized him, he married had kids

and wanted to purchase a home. Come to find out that he could not find legitimate mortgage financing.

From 1930s-1960s Black people across the country were largely cut out of the legitimate home-mortgage market through legal and extra-legal means. In the 1930s, as part of the New Deal, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) created loan programs to help make home ownership accessible to more Americans. The Government created color-coded maps — green for good neighborhoods and red for bad neighborhoods — to determine who got those loans.

Can we guess what made for a neighborhood to be considered “bad”? You got it, many neighborhoods were designated as red/bad because blacks and other people of color lived in them. This is what we all know today as “red-lining.”

This process encouraged developers in green areas to explicitly discriminate against non-whites. Developers would bring households of color into wealth stripping “land contracts,” where they paid exorbitant prices for homes that they could lose very easily. Certain men would sell housing contracts, selling homes at inflated prices and then evict families that couldn’t pay, bring in a new black family, rinse and repeat.

- These policies through the government resulted in 98% of home loans going to white families, from 1934 to 1962.

What happens when new homes are built and people start accruing wealth in an area? New businesses are attracted to those neighborhoods, bringing a boom of energy, new roads and infrastructure are built, new schools and higher-quality government services. These things in turn increased property values and allowed those homeowners access to other wealth building vehicles like going to college. As a result, wealth in the white communities compounded and passed to future generations.

Even after these racially exclusionary policies were eliminated, the lack of wealth in the black American community still prevented minorities from moving up to the green/good neighborhoods and subsequently kept the communities separated by race.

So many things contribute to this racial divide and wealth gap I simply don't have the time today to discuss all the layers: a racially skewed criminal justice system; mass incarceration; lack of education; underemployment and unemployment; taxes favoring the wealthy, etc.

It's no secret that these facts and numbers often lay heavily on my heart. And so, I want to include just a few findings that point to the resilience and determination of blacks even in the most unjust of economic systems.

- By the year 1900 nearly 22 percent of African-American male household heads owned their homes. Considered to be a great achievement considering that in 1870, their wealth measured zero.
- In Manning Marable's book *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, he points out the following: Black capitalist success stories actually multiplied as Jim Crow restrictions rose.
- In fact, the total number of black owned businesses in the U.S. doubled in a little more than a decade, reaching 40,000 between 1900 and 1914 (Marable, 129).
- In 2017, 87% of blacks ages 25 and older had a high school diploma or equivalent.
- In 2018 African American college graduation hit an all time high.

There are two African-Americans I want to spotlight as having ideas that could positively impact the injustice of our economic system.

Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander (1898-1989), the first African American woman to receive a PhD in economics in the U.S. in 1921 and the first to receive a law degree from the University of Pennsylvania law school. She was not a practicing economist due to gender and racial obstacles, but she still shared her economic perspectives on government employment, and many find her perspectives to be applicable today. Sadie Alexander was the first economist to recommend

a government jobs guarantee in the US decades before it caught on with other economists, according to Nina Banks at the Institute for New Economic Thinking (Feb 2019).

The jobs program would address a number of problems including involuntary unemployment, low compensation levels, and labor market discrimination. Many contemporary economists have endorsed this idea, and it is something to consider when imagining a better world for all of us. Nina Banks in her article, “The Black Woman Economist Who Pioneered a Federal Jobs Guarantee” quotes Alexander saying, “I hold it the obligation of every American to remove those inequities which have crept into our national life and caused men to fear want and to fear each other.”

I also want to lift up Rev. Dr. Delman Coates, an African - American Christian minister who has served as the Senior Pastor of Mt. Ennon Baptist Church, located in Clinton, Maryland. Rev. Delman Coates is a graduate of Morehouse College, Harvard Divinity School, and Columbia University. He recently founded an organization called Our Money that advocates for economic justice and re-legitimizing the power of money creation for the benefit of the public. He is also a good friend of one of my economics professors from Denison University who sits on the board of this organization. Rev. Dr. Coates is considered a current rising star in the realm of advocating for economic justice in our society today.

I leave you with this last story: There was a man living with his family some fifteen or so years after the ending of slavery, in Alabama. He was a successful entrepreneur, a mulatto man operating several businesses, including a cotton gin, a sawmill, and a blacksmith shop. Some of his white business counterparts wanted to buy his business/land and home. He refused to sell.

The white men who wanted his businesses and land, got angry, murdered him and set his home on fire.

The name of the mulatto business man was William (Bill) Conley, he was married to Rachel Conley and they had four children. He was my grandfather's great uncle. In the face of adversity, my family is still here, William paid in blood for his, our, and my future success. He lost his life for economic justice, likely knowing what his resistance would cost.

Let us continue forward, let us come together to find solutions for economic injustice and systemic racism. Let us be the Body of Christ and do it together, as Anthony said last week, we can resist the darkness in many ways. Let's choose to resist with love, with abundant giving, and with the intent to create an economic system that nourishes us all.

Amen.

Resources for your further exploration:

Our Money Campaign: <https://www.ourmoneyus.org/>

The Racial Wealth Gap. Netflix: Explained, series.

<https://www.netflix.com/title/80216752?s=a&trkid=13747225&t=cp>

How the Other Half Banks: Exclusion, Exploitation, and the Threat to Democracy. By: Mehrsa Baradaran.

Beyond Broke: Why Closing the Racial Wealth Gap is a Priority for National Economic Security. By: Avis Jones-DeWeever, Darrick Hamilton, Maya Rockeymoore, Rebecca Tippet, and William Darity, Jr.

Discriminatory penalties at the intersection of race and gender in the United States. By: Mark Paul, Darrick Hamilton, and William Darity, Jr.

How “Baby Bonds” Could Help Close the Wealth Gap; Ted talk by Darrick Hamilton. [Ted.com/YouTube.com](https://ted.com/YouTube.com)

“Working Hard Ain’t Enough for Black Americans”—Dr. Darrick Hamilton, <https://youtu.be/l1I-LWH9ZcU>

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“Women Rising”

*Part V of VI in the sermon series
“400 years of Africans in America”*

Genesis 16:1–16 and 21:1–21

The Rev. Dr. Renee Wormack-Keels
Guest Minister

August 25, 2019

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I am honored to be with you today. I am grateful to your pastor, Dr. Tim, for this invitation. It's a privilege to call him colleague AND friend.

This morning, in this sermon series on Race and Racism, I would like to explore a story that does not always get a lot of attention, about a relationship between two women, one man and God. For God is often, if not always, in the midst of our human relationships.

“Woman Rising”

Genesis 16:1–16 and 21:1–21

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*Let’s pray and then we can talk further. God of our weary years.
God of our silent tears, God who has brought us safe thus far.
Thank you for these moments that are yours and ours to share.*

*Now God, I am standing your promises that you would stand up
in me, when I stood up on your behalf. Allow the words of my
mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable...*

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I won’t read the text from Genesis 16:1–16 and 21:1–21, (but suggest at your leisure sometime, that you read this text, its worthy of at least a 6 week bible study on the several themes) but simply will retell the biblical story of two women, one man and God. It is a story that runs parallel to the experience’s African American women during the period of chattel slavery in the United States.

Christian and Muslim African Americans have, for the most part, placed scripture and the biblical text at the center of their faith traditions. Scripture is God’s divine word for living.

The story in Genesis 16 and 21 is an “ancestral story” that mirrors the experience of enslaved African women in this country. It has at times been preached in the context of finding God in the Wilderness (another theme in African American history). It has been preached in the context of legalism as found in the book of Galatians 4:21-31. It has even been explored in the context of Islam and the bible, as Hagar and Ishmael appear in the Islamic tradition as foundational to Islamic faith traditions.

For more than 200 years, African Americans have appropriated the biblical figure of Hagar. She has appeared in the literature, social science, historical, anthropological and theological sources:

Edmonia Lewis – 19th century African American sculpture carved a famous Statue – Hagar in the Wilderness.

Ex-slave **Susie King Taylor** – in her narrative tells of her grandmother who named one of her children – Hagar Ann.

The poet, **Paul Lawrence Dunbar**, in 1906 wrote about the Members of the Afro American Sons of Hagar Social Club.

Richard Wright – referred to the African American family as Hagar’s children.

Maya Angelou's poem, *The Mothering Blackness*, alludes to the woman as "black as Hagar's daughters."

Our beloved, **Toni Morrison**, whose passing we continue to mourn, named one of her characters, Hagar, in *Song of Solomon*.

Many others, known and unknown, have lifted up Hagar and the theme of survival struggle.

However, this morning my perspective comes from the womanist¹ theologian, Dr. Delores Williams, and her work: *Sisters in the Wilderness: The challenge of God-Talk*.

African American Christians have appropriated biblical stories and personalities and their experiences as sources for models of faith, courage and hope as a promise that God participates in the human struggle for freedom.²

For black women, Hagar's story is a "haunting one". It represents for the black woman, sexual and economic exploitation, trauma and violence at the hands of her Hebrew mistress. Like slave women, Hagar – a female slave of African descent who was forced to be a surrogate mother for to her

¹ Womanist is a term derived from the word "womanism" created by Alice Walker in her work, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens." In essence it means the behavior of a young black girl who is "acting" grown – like a woman.

² Delores Williams, page 171, Hagar, Sarah and Their Children.

owner's son and who was abandoned in the wilderness as a homeless single mother.

This story has been the story of many of our great, great grandmothers, great grandmothers and yes, even grandmothers. It has elements of my own maternal grandmother and my mother's stories as women who worked as domestics.

It may not be fair to make this story carry the total weight of race relations in the modern world, yet many aspects of the "themes" of this text find similarity within our historical context of these 400 years of Africans in America. I am two generations away from the women who worked as domestics.

And if I really tell the truth, I remember those times when I went to work with my mother as a teen and young adult, to help my mom serve holiday parties when I was in college and home on vacation to earn a little spending money.

The appropriation of this story has been foundational for black women doing theology, especially Delores Williams who sought to create a theology that was inclusive of women, and men and children – the entire African American community.

What is important to note here is that, Williams was perhaps one of the strongest critics of Black Liberation Theology and

Black Theology, developed by James Cone in the 1960s. James Cone, known as the father of Black Liberation Theology created the model of liberation theology *as a cultural lens through which to examine not only the biblical text but also to interpret theological standpoints on the issue of social justice.*

Dr. Cone trained as a systematic theologian writes these words:

“a gospel when interpreted that has nothing to do with Black people’s struggle for cultural identify and political justice is antithetical to the central message of the Gospel – liberation.”³

Delores Williams and other women theologians, said it was a theology with limitations as far as black women are concerned, because it did not consider the context of women’s lives and experiences. Therefore, issues of gender, sexual orientation and exploitation, poverty and economics were not inclusive.

Hagar’s experience in the wilderness is symbolic to the living reality of many African American women and children who live in conditions of peril here and now. A single mom abandoned and alone (but for God) has spoken to generations of women in our culture. She has appeared in poems, sculptures, sermons, stories, painting (and soon to appear in a piece of fiber art), and a reminder of the suffering endured by generations of black women.

³ James Cone, I Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody, 2018, pp. 59 - 64

I want to share with you this morning, a few take aways or themes from this story.

- 1) **Faith** – A faith tradition that has undergirded women’s faith and belief that God sees, hears and is involved in our struggle for survival, it provides HOPE in times of trouble.
- 2) **A method of biblical interpretation** – womanism or womanist theology – a special lens that includes black women’s traditions and practices as a way of biblical interpretation. It is different from feminist theology (a theology of predominantly white women) and black theology (a theology predominately practiced by black men) because it includes the full dimension and unique oppressions of black women.
- 3) **The theme of resilience** in the midst of suffering and trauma.

Faith in God’s Presence: Hagar and Ishmael are alone in the desert; banished from the household of Sarah and Abraham, God found Hagar and told her to return. God gave her a promise almost identical to the promise made to Abraham. God promised to make her descendants “too numerous to count.” The name Ishmael in Hebrew means, God hears, for the Lord has heard of your misery. Hagar is the ONLY person in the whole Bible to name God. To give God a name – she

shows amazing agency and power in this poignant moment of encounter with the divine. “You are the Living One who sees me.”

Fast forward fifteen years to Genesis 21 – which takes us back to the story of Ishmael. Isaac’s birth to Sarah, now causes jealousy with Hagar and her son, Ishmael. Again, Sarah demands that Hagar and her now teenage son be banished to the desert. No resources – no food and no water - perhaps the equivalent of a small bottle of water and a granola bar in the middle of the Sonora desert. It appears that both mother and son will perish in the wilderness, so Hagar leaves her son under a bush and goes a way off so that she won’t have to witness his death. Like any mother, she weeps and sobs as mother’s do, with love for her child. One again, the Genesis storyteller uses word play on Ishmael’s names to make the point, God heard the boy crying – which is like saying – God heard the boy named God’s hers. “Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” Then God opens Hagar’s eyes and she sees a well of water. She fills a skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

Finding water in the desert, is about surviving against all the odds. Making a way out of no way. My grandmother would say, “He may not come when you want Him, but He is always on time.

So many black women have felt moments of despair where there just did not seem to be a way out. Struggling to protect our children, especially our boys whose very lives seem to be in peril beginning at birth. And even when they reach adulthood, which many of us used to think – “we can breathe now.” Grown, out of high school or college, or the military or on their way to making it – only to be confronted with the peril of “I can’t breathe” because it does not matter their age or situation, the lives of our sons and our daughters **are still in jeopardy.**

Hagar and Ishmael model for generations of African American women, that in spite of poverty, trying to hold the family together, make a living for herself and her child with only God by her side.

In the theme of resilience in the midst of suffering and trauma.

Resilience in the midst of suffering and generational trauma resonates across the generations of black women. I am reminded of the life of Maya Angelou who tells of her own story of rape and abuse as a child and young adult. In, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, she publicly discussed aspects of her personal life. She shared a story that was the story of so many women who could not find their voice to tell of their

experiences of violence and sexual exploitation. Generational trauma that has been passed down from one generation to another because women and to “generations yet unborn.” *Caged Bird* was like a breath of fresh air for some who were able to say – that’s my story too. Perhaps if she [Maya] could get better – then so can I. Healing can and does take place when we are able to see ourselves in the lived experiences of others. Renita Weems writes, “at some time in all our lives, whether we are black, white, Latina, or whatever our ethnicity, two women involved with the same man and both have his children, we need another woman, who is “just a sister away” to sister us and not exploit us.

In the midst of suffering, there are no easy answers. Why we suffer or why some people suffer more than others. Ishmael and Hagar bear witness that God is not impersonal or impassive, without feeling or emotion. God is with us in our struggles against all odds, to make a way out of no way. In the midst of trials and tribulations, God is watching. God invites us to offer a cup of water to one in need and to welcome the stranger. There are just no easy answers to the suffering – I don’t know much, but what I do know I know for sure... We can sing ... Our mothers, and grandmothers had a song. A song and a text – I don’t know if Hagar had a song...but if she did...I imagine that she might have sung, *His Eye is on the Sparrow – and I know He Watches Me.*

Sister Rosetta Tharpe sang it in 1951.

Ethel Waters sang it in 1952.

Mahalia Jackson sang it in 1956.

Carmen McRae sang it in 1958.

George Beverly Shea sang it in 1959.

Marvin Gaye sang it in 1968.

Tennessee Ernie Ford sang it in 1975.

Jennifer Holiday sang it in 1986.

Lauryn Hill and Kirk Franklin sang it in 1993.

Andy Griffith sang it in 1997.

Gladys Knight sang it at Michael's funeral in 2009.

Ron Isley sang it at Aretha's funeral in 2018.

And I, mother of three sons, continue to sing it in 2019.

His Eye is on the Sparrow and I know He watches me.

You ask me why I can sing in the midst of trials and tribulations. I sing because I am happy. I sing because I am free.

God's eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches over me!

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TEXT

Genesis 16: Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had not been able to bear children for him. But she had an Egyptian servant named Hagar. ² So Sarai said to Abram, "The Lord has prevented me from having children. Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her." And Abram agreed with Sarai's proposal. ³ So Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian servant and gave her to Abram as a wife. (This happened ten years after Abram had settled in the land of Canaan.)

⁴ So Abram had sexual relations with Hagar, and she became pregnant. But when Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to treat her mistress, Sarai, with contempt. ⁵ Then Sarai said to Abram, "This is all your fault! I put my servant into your arms, but now that she's pregnant she treats me with contempt. The Lord will show who's wrong—you or me!"

⁶ Abram replied, "Look, she is your servant, so deal with her as you see fit." Then Sarai treated Hagar so harshly that she finally ran away.

⁷ The angel of the Lord found Hagar beside a spring of water in the wilderness, along the road to Shur. ⁸ The angel said to her, "Hagar, Sarai's servant, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

“I’m running away from my mistress, Sarai,” she replied.

⁹ The angel of the Lord said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit to her authority.”¹⁰ Then he added, “I will give you more descendants than you can count.”

¹¹ And the angel also said, “You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son. You are to name him Ishmael (which means ‘God hears’), for the Lord has heard your cry of distress.¹² This son of yours will be a wild man, as untamed as a wild donkey! He will raise his fist against everyone, and everyone will be against him. Yes, he will live in open hostility against all his relatives.”

¹³ Thereafter, Hagar used another name to refer to the Lord, who had spoken to her. She said, “You are the God who sees me.”^[a] She also said, “Have I truly seen the One who sees me?”¹⁴ So that well was named Beer-lahai-roi (which means “well of the Living One who sees me”). It can still be found between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵ So Hagar gave Abram a son, and Abram named him Ishmael. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born.

Genesis 21:8-21

Hagar and Ishmael Are Sent Away

⁸ When Isaac grew up and was about to be weaned, Abraham prepared a huge feast to celebrate the occasion. ⁹ But Sarah saw Ishmael—the son of Abraham and her Egyptian servant Hagar—making fun of her son, Isaac. ^[b] ¹⁰ So she turned to Abraham and demanded, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son. He is not going to share the inheritance with my son, Isaac. I won’t have it!”

¹¹ This upset Abraham very much because Ishmael was his son. ¹² But God told Abraham, “Do not be upset over the boy and your servant. Do whatever Sarah tells you, for Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted. ¹³ But I will also make a nation of the descendants of Hagar’s son because he is your son, too.”

¹⁴ So Abraham got up early the next morning, prepared food and a container of water, and strapped them on Hagar’s shoulders. Then he sent her away with their son, and she wandered aimlessly in the wilderness of Beersheba.

¹⁵ When the water was gone, she put the boy in the shade of a bush. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down by herself about a

hundred yards^[c] away. “I don’t want to watch the boy die,” she said, as she burst into tears.

¹⁷ But God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, “Hagar, what’s wrong? Do not be afraid! God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. ¹⁸ Go to him and comfort him, for I will make a great nation from his descendants.”

¹⁹ Then God opened Hagar’s eyes, and she saw a well full of water. She quickly filled her water container and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰ And God was with the boy as he grew up in the wilderness. He became a skillful archer,²¹ and he settled in the wilderness of Paran. His mother arranged for him to marry a woman from the land of Egypt.

“Reparations”

*Part VI of VI in the sermon series
“400 years of Africans in America”*

Sirach 10:12-18, Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1,7-14

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens
Senior Minister

September 1, 2019

13 boy

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 1, 2019, 12th Sunday of Pentecost, Proper 16, dedicated to Holly Reed who entered eternal life on August 29, to Cornelius Hawkins and the 272 sold by Georgetown Jesuits in 1838, and to all the generations of slaves and all Descendants of slaves who carry the story 400 years and counting and always to the glory of God!

“Reparations”

Sirach 10:12-18, Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1,7-14

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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His name was Cornelius Hawkins. Most people called him “Neely.” He was 13 years old when he moved from Maryland to Louisiana. He and his family did not choose to move. They

were human cargo loaded on ships against their will at the bustling wharf of our nation's capital destined for plantations in the Deep South. Some slaves pleaded for rosaries as they were rounded up, praying for deliverance.

But on this day, in the fall of 1838, 272 slaves were loaded on ships. No one was spared: not the 2-month-old baby and her mother, not the field hands, not the shoemaker and not Cornelius Hawkins. They were all forced onboard.

Their panic and desperation would be mostly forgotten for well over a century. But this was no ordinary slave sale. The enslaved African Americans had belonged to the nation's most prominent Jesuit priests. And they were sold, along with scores of others, to help secure the future of the premier Catholic institution of higher learning at the time, known today as Georgetown University.

What began in hushed tones once it was discovered that Georgetown sold 272 slaves whose net worth in our dollars today was \$3.3 million dollars, has risen to protests and outrage. This sale was arranged and led by two Jesuit priests who were two of the early presidents of Georgetown University.

Historians, students, alumni and genealogists are trying to figure out what happened to those 272 men, women and children. And this question, has confronted the university community and all across the nation involved in this “dig” – *“What if anything is owed to the descendants of slaves who were sold to help insure the college’s survival?”*

More than a dozen universities — including [Brown](#), Yale, [Columbia](#), [Harvard](#) and the [University of Virginia](#) — have publicly recognized their ties to slavery and the slave trade. But the 1838 slave sale organized by the Jesuits, who founded and ran Georgetown, stands out for its sheer size, historians say.

At Georgetown, slavery and scholarship were inextricably linked. The college relied on Jesuit plantations in Maryland to help finance its operations, university officials say. And slaves were often donated by prosperous parishioners the same way you might give a major endowment gift to a university today.

“The university itself owes its existence to this history,” said [Adam Rothman](#), a historian at Georgetown and a member of a [university working group](#) that is studying ways for the institution to acknowledge and try to make amends for its tangled roots in slavery.

GU students have organized protests and a sit-in, using the hashtag #GU272 for the slaves who were sold. In November 2015, the university [agreed](#) to remove the names of the Rev. [Thomas F. Mulledy](#) and the Rev. William McSherry, the college presidents involved in the sale, from two campus buildings. The buildings have been renamed Isaac Hawkins Hall after the man whose name was at the head of the sale and the second was named for Anne Marie Becraft, a black 19th Century educator.

At the renaming, Georgetown President John DeGioia said at the religious service, which included slave descendants, that the school had been complicit in the United States' "original sin" of slavery. *"We offer this apology for the descendants and your ancestors humbly and without expectations, and we trust ourselves to God and the Spirit and the grace He freely offers to find ways to work together and build together,"* he said.

Apologies are not enough.

Last year, 180 years after the sale of 272 slaves to a Baton Rouge, Louisiana dealer who broke up families and sold them for greater profit to three separate plantations, Georgetown made this decision: They would offer full scholarships to those who could prove they were descendants of the 272 men,

women and children who were sold as slaves. That is a true form of reparations. Now, the great, great, great, grandchildren of slaves can matriculate at Georgetown University on full-ride scholarships. This is a value of \$250,000 for a four-year education. Some say that is not enough. But, in the whole debate and national dialogue about what we should do to repair the breach and the devastation of slavery, it is a significant step in the right direction by one Christian University to address our original sin of slavery. But it is still not enough.

The enslaved, who were herded like cattle onto the Katherine Jackson and the other slave ships sailing south, were grandmothers and grandfathers, carpenters and blacksmiths, pregnant women and anxious fathers, children and infants. They were fearful, bewildered and despairing as they saw their families and communities ripped apart by the sale of 1838. As research unfolded about their arrival in Louisiana, there were few details to follow. There were no letters to family back in Maryland, no journals, nothing more than the manifest and the letters of sale. But, through scrupulous research, a strong test case emerged out of the faith and practice of the 13 year old boy – Cornelius Hawkins.

Neely was not yet five feet tall when he sailed onboard the Katharine Jackson. An inspector scrutinized [the cargo on Dec. 6, 1838](#). “Examined and found correct,” he wrote of Cornelius and the 129 other people he found on the ship. The notation betrayed no hint of the turmoil on board. But priests at the Jesuit plantations recounted the panic and fear they witnessed when the slaves departed. Some children were sold without their parents, records show, and slaves were “dragged off the plantation by force to the ship,” the Rev. Thomas Lilly reported. Others, including two of Cornelius’s uncles, ran away before they could be captured.

The big worry about which the Georgetown priests expressed in their personal journals at the time was that the slaves might not be able to continue their practice of Catholic faith on the new plantations. They also knew that life on plantations in the Deep South was notoriously brutal, and feared that families might end up being separated and resold.

But, one priest resisted. Rev. Jan Roothann wrote, *“It would be better to suffer financial disaster than suffer the loss of our souls with the sale of the slaves.”* He headed the Jesuits’ international organization from Rome and was initially reluctant to authorize the sale. But he was eventually persuaded to reconsider by several prominent Jesuits, including Father

Mulledy, then the influential president of Georgetown who had overseen its expansion, and Father McSherry, who was in charge of the Jesuits' Maryland mission.

After the sale, Cornelius vanishes from the public record until 1851 when his trail finally picks back up on a cotton plantation near Maringouin, La. His owner, Mr. Batey, had died, and Cornelius appeared on the plantation's inventory, which included 27 mules and horses, 32 hogs, two ox carts and scores of other slaves. He was valued at \$900. ("Valuable Plantation and Negroes for Sale," read one newspaper advertisement in 1852.) The plantation would be sold again and again and again, records show, but Cornelius's family remained intact. In 1870, he appeared in the census for the first time. He was about 48 then, a father, a husband, a farm laborer and, finally, a free man.

He might have disappeared from view again for a time, save for something few could have counted on: his deep, abiding faith. It was his Catholicism, born on the Jesuit plantations of his childhood, that would provide researchers with a road map to his descendants. Cornelius had originally been shipped to a plantation so far from a church that he had married in a civil ceremony. But six years after he appeared in the census, and

about three decades after the birth of his first child, he renewed his wedding vows with the blessing of a priest.

His children and grandchildren also embraced the Catholic church. So [Judy Riffel](#), one of the genealogists hired by Mr. Cellini, began following a chain of weddings and births, baptisms and burials. It was these Church records which led researchers to Neely's present-day family. It was the faithfulness of Cornelius Hawkins which eventually uncovered the faithlessness of the Georgetown Jesuits who owned him and sold him to others.

Not long ago, two of his descending sisters drove on the narrow roads that line the green, rippling sugar cane fields in Iberville Parish. There was no need for a map. They were heading to the only Catholic cemetery in Maringouin. They found the last physical marker of Cornelius's journey at the Immaculate Heart of Mary cemetery, where their father, grandmother and great-grandfather are also buried. The worn gravestone had toppled, but the wording was plain: "Neely Hawkins Died April 16, 1902." Nelly Hawkins was 67 years old when he died. (largely taken from Rachel L. Swarns *272 slaves were sold to save Georgetown. What does it owe their descendants?* New York Times, April 16, 2016).

In the end, Neely's deep faith in Jesus Christ as his savior saved the story of 272 sold in 1838. His Christian faith led to the reparations for generations to come. This is truly an amazing story.

In her powerful essay published two weeks ago as the first feature in *The New York Times Magazine*, special edition, the "1619 Project," award winning author Nikole Hannah-Jones, writes:

They say our people were born on the water.

When it occurred, no one can say for certain. Perhaps it was in the second week, or the third, but surely by the fourth, when they had not seen their land or any land for so many days that they lost count. It was after fear had turned to despair, and despair to resignation, and resignation to an abiding understanding. The teal eternity of the Atlantic Ocean had severed them so completely from what had once been their home that it was as if nothing had ever existed before, as if everything and everyone they cherished had simply vanished from the earth. They were no longer Mbundu or Akan or Fulani. These men and women from many different nations, all shackled together in the suffocating hull of the ship, they were one people now.

Just a few months earlier, they had families, and farms, and lives and dreams. They were free. They had names, of course, but their enslavers did not bother to record them. They had been made black by those people who believed that they were white, and where they were heading, black equaled “slave,” and slavery in America required turning human beings into property by stripping them of every element that made them individuals. This process was called seasoning, in which people stolen from western and central Africa were forced, often through torture, to stop speaking their native tongues and practicing their native religions.

But as the sociologist Glenn Bracey wrote, “Out of the ashes of white denigration, we gave birth to ourselves.” For as much as white people tried to pretend, black people were not chattel. And so, the process of seasoning, instead of erasing identity, served an opposite purpose: In the void, we forged a new culture all our own.

Today, our very manner of speaking recalls the Creole languages that enslaved people innovated in order to communicate both with Africans speaking various dialects and the English-speaking people who enslaved them. Our style of dress, the extra flair, stems back to the desires of enslaved people — shorn of all individuality — to exert their own identity. Enslaved people would wear their hat in a jaunty manner or knot their head scarves intricately. Today’s avant-garde nature of black hairstyles and fashion displays a

vibrant reflection of enslaved people's determination to feel fully human through self-expression. The improvisational quality of black art and music comes from a culture that because of constant disruption could not cling to convention. Black naming practices, so often impugned by mainstream society, are themselves an act of resistance. Our last names belong to the white people who once owned us. That is why the insistence of many black Americans, particularly those most marginalized, to give our children names that we create, that are neither European nor from Africa, a place we have never been, is an act of self-determination. When the world listens to quintessential American music, it is our voice they hear. The sorrow songs we sang in the fields to soothe our physical pain and find hope in a freedom we did not expect to know until we died became American gospel. Amid the devastating violence and poverty of the Mississippi Delta, we birthed jazz and blues. And it was in the deeply impoverished and segregated neighborhoods where white Americans forced the descendants of the enslaved to live that teenagers too poor to buy instruments used old records to create a new music known as hip-hop.

Our speech and fashion and the drum of our music echoes Africa but is not African. Out of our unique isolation, both from our native cultures and from white America, we forged this nation's most significant original culture. In turn, "mainstream" society has coveted our style, our slang and our song, seeking to appropriate the

one truly American culture as its own. As Langston Hughes wrote in 1926, “They’ll see how beautiful I am/And be ashamed —/I, too, am America.”

For centuries, white Americans have been trying to solve the “Negro problem.” They have dedicated thousands of pages to this endeavor. It is common, still, to point to rates of black poverty, out-of-wedlock births, crime and college attendance, as if these conditions in a country built on a racial caste system are not utterly predictable. But crucially, you cannot view those statistics while ignoring another: that black people were enslaved here longer than we have been free.

At 43, I am part of the first generation of black Americans in the history of the United States to be born into a society in which black people had full rights of citizenship. Black people suffered under slavery for 250 years; we have been legally “free” for just 50. Yet in that briefest of spans, despite continuing to face rampant discrimination, and despite there never having been a genuine effort to redress the wrongs of slavery and the century of racial apartheid that followed, black Americans have made astounding progress, not only for ourselves but also for all Americans.

What if America understood, finally, in this 400th year, that we have never been the problem but the solution?

When I was a child — I must have been in fifth or sixth grade — a teacher gave our class an assignment intended to celebrate the diversity of the great American melting pot. She instructed each of us to write a short report on our ancestral land and then draw that nation's flag. As she turned to write the assignment on the board, the other black girl in class locked eyes with me. Slavery had erased any connection we had to an African country, and even if we tried to claim the whole continent, there was no "African" flag. It was hard enough being one of two black kids in the class, and this assignment would just be another reminder of the distance between the white kids and us. In the end, I walked over to the globe near my teacher's desk, picked a random African country and claimed it as my own.

I wish, now, that I could go back to the younger me and tell her that her people's ancestry started here, on these lands, and to boldly, proudly, draw the stars and those stripes of the American flag. (The same flag her father flew every day over her house growing up.)

*We were told once, by virtue of our bondage, that we could never be American. But it was by virtue of our bondage that we became the most American of all. (Nicole Hannah-Jones, *The New York Times Magazine*, "1619 Project," August 18, 2019).*

Thanks be to God for all who carry African descent but are American - “by virtue of their bondage –undeniably - the most American of all.” Amen.

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