

# *“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*

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*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 9<sup>th</sup> and the assassination of President Lincoln on April 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup>, the nation was left in the hands of a Democrat from Tennessee, Andrew Johnson, our 17<sup>th</sup> 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 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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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