

“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

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

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

+++++

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.

+++++

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.

Copyright 2019, First Congregational Church, UCC