



Our Secret Racist Selves: Stumbling Block or Cornerstone?

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
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Acts 7:55-60:

But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

Peter 2:2-10:

Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation — if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner," and "A stone that makes them stumble, and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

My cousin twice removed, Katrina Browne—Stanhope and Libby's daughter—has recently produced a documentary film called *Traces of the Trade* in which ten members of our family, my father among them, embark on a journey of discovery about our ancestors.

Abigail Potter and Mark Antony DeWolf were married in Bristol, Rhode Island, in 1744. Over the next twenty-three years they gave birth to fifteen children. The DeWolf offspring grew to be the largest slave-running family in America. They worked what is known as the "Triangle Trade." Taking rum that was distilled in Bristol, they sailed to the western coast of Africa. There they traded their rum for people: men, women and children. The enslaved Africans were brought to Caribbean Islands where they worked, growing and harvesting sugar cane; turning it into molasses. The ships then brought the molasses back to Bristol where it was distilled into rum, and the cycle began once more.

I said the DeWolf's were the largest American slave-running family. During the height of the slave trade, the 1760s to the 1820s, eleven million women, men and children were taken from the shores of Africa. Nine point two million are recorded as at least having reached a destination. All but the 400,000 who were brought to the Continental United States were sold in the Caribbean. I do not know how many of these the DeWolf's were responsible for. They captained the ships, founded and owned the insurance company to protect their investment, secured needed political favors, owned and operated the plantations in Cuba; they worked the whole deal from beginning to end, very effective.

Some DeWolf's were lost at sea; another committed suicide on the African coast; others built and lived in luxurious mansions in Bristol. When the War of 1812 broke out, they had more and better-equipped ships than the U.S. Navy. Captain James DeWolf, a U.S. Senator who used his influence to continue slaving long after it was a criminal offense, was said to be the second wealthiest man in the nation when he died in 1837. (His wealth was completely gone within two generations). At times when they weren't running slaves, the DeWolf's were privateers; legalized pirates.

I am descended from this family. Several years ago Katrina arranged for about 40 of us distant cousins to gather in Bristol. We visited one of the spectacular mansions, now a museum. At the Historical Society, I read letters sent from brother to brother, father to son, Cuba to Bristol. I read letters reporting the capture of other ships, and of slaves bound and thrown overboard. I held steel manacles, used to chain a person's ankles; I held a rope whip. All of it, much, much too real.

Katrina's film narrates the journey as ten family members retraced the Triangle Trade, with a week in Ghana, a week in Cuba and the 4th of July in Bristol. My father has spoken of his feelings of shame and anger standing inside the massive stone prisons on the coast of Ghana, where no light penetrated, the only sound: that of the sea beating on the rocks, and the very narrow passage through which men, women and children were led to waiting ships. A man there told my father he thought of slavery and racism as a hidden wound; scabbed over, yet still raw within.

The film is effective on several levels. First and most obviously, it tells history, brings to life not just our family's past, but also our nation's past. As this nation was rebuilt in the aftermath of the Civil War, the winners in the North, the preservers of the union, assumed the privilege of writing the history. In so doing, they—we—conveniently neglected to mention our northern dependence on and complicity in the economy of slavery, preferring instead to bestow upon ourselves the mantle of abolitionist virtue and moral cleanliness. Yet the economic growth of the entire nation was predicated on slavery.

Connected to this conveniently forgotten history, but woven through the film is the fact that the church was complicit in the slave trade, and that the church may have a much-needed role today in addressing the damage that was done. In a particularly pointed scene, when the family members are moving through the fortress prison on the African coast, entering where the shackled men and women were brought in, where they were imprisoned and where they were led out to the waiting ships, we learn that first off, upon arrival, they were baptized, stripped of their identity, given a new name—by the church.

Thus, an earlier draft of the film, shown to the bishops and deputies at our Episcopal Church's triennial General Convention a couple of summers ago, helped fuel the passage of some long-needed resolutions—acknowledging and apologizing for the church's role in slavery, and calling upon every diocese and every parish to study and explore our own local role in slavery. Of course, both slaves and the owners of slaves worshiped here at St. Peter's, baptisms and marriages all listed in the parish register. As part of the observance of St. Peter's 250th Anniversary and in keeping with the Resolution, we will do a thorough study of slavery here.

What are the implications of stories such as these? What, if anything, are we to do with our knowledge of this history? What is our responsibility today to address and seek to remedy the harm done? I know the DeWolf story is extreme, but we each have a racial narrative: perceptions and behaviors taught and learned, implicitly or explicitly; suspicions, fears, injustices deeply embedded in our family fabric. 2008 marks the 200th Anniversary of the Abolition of the Slave Trade. It also marks the 40th Anniversary of the Kerner Report, a study of the race riots of the 1960s, which observed: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal." Despite select advancements, extreme and widespread racial inequity continues today. How are we to address it? What part will you play?

A seemingly modest, yet vitally important, first step is to tell the stories that are ours to tell, and to listen to the stories of others. Our capacity to not see that which is right in front of us, that which is within us; . . . our learned ability to be blind, combined with our tendency to keep secret anything shameful from our past, is a potent prescription for inaction. Telling and hearing seem to be such small things, yet they are prerequisite to—and may be catalyst for—the action necessary for reconciliation and the creation of a new order of racial equity and justice.

In different ways our scripture lessons from the Book of Acts and the First Letter of Peter each speak of the earliest, formative days of the Christian community, the church. Acts tells of a man named Stephen, chosen to be a deacon, given special responsibility to care for the neediest among them. Passionate and articulate, Stephen found himself in a hostile crowd, harassed for the truth he was speaking. They killed Stephen; he is the first one martyred for his belief. As he died, Stephen looked and told them what he saw: the heavens open and the glory and love of God shining upon them. But the witnesses, what did they do with this impossible truth of forgiveness? The text says they covered their ears, and shouted all the louder.

Too often, this is what we do when we hear truth that will upset our current arrangements; we cover our ears and shout louder. "I am not racist!" we think; "this is not my inheritance; I have no part in this." Yet, the truth is all of us, and each of us, are related to and dependent upon one another. Instead of covering our ears, can we not open them, be quiet and listen to the other?

The letter of Peter is sent to encourage a struggling little community. Peter reminds the community that the stumbling block is now the cornerstone, that that which has been the obstacle to the future is now the foundation for the future. We hear that expression often in Scripture; Jesus speaks of it in several instances. To be perfectly honest, I've often stumbled over its meaning. But it is simply this: that the solution lies within that thing which was been the problem. Jesus says that those who were cast out and considered beyond the ways of God's law and love, are now at the center, providing the way, the new community.

I sense that there is a parallel here. We have these stories of a terrible past. Our temptation, born of shame and self-deceit, is to bury those stories, forget them, unlearn them, keep them ever secret. Yet is not our liberation and reconciliation to be found in the very telling of those secret stories of our past? The secrets themselves are the stumbling block. Might they then become the cornerstone? Must the secrets not be brought to light and air, however uncomfortable it makes us, in order for healing to take place? Then, as Jesus has said, "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood." Amen.