

“Founding,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 10/4/26



Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Matthew 21:33-46

I am hoping that you recognize our first reading, the Ten Commandments. It is bread and butter religion, so basic as almost to be assumed. Yes, you need to hear them first at some time in your life, but then they become so familiar, so second nature, so central.

But if you look at the order of service, you might note an odd detail. The citation is to Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20. We skipped a bit. And when the lectionary skips something, it is usually for one of two reasons. First, it is something terribly boring, like seventeen generations of names that you do not recognize and likely could not pronounce. We glide past Methuselah and Enoch and get to the good stuff.

The second reason for skipping over some verses is when they contain something uncomfortable, something that a pastor does not want to explain on Sunday morning. Let's just tidy things up, sing a few bars of Kumbaya, and go have some coffee.

Well, this morning, I wanted to go over those omissions. Sorry, no Kumbaya. The first gap is verses 5 and 6, right after God declares that the people of Israel shall not have false idols. In the missing part, God goes further:

You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Punishing children for the sins of their parents to the third and fourth generation. Meaning your great-grandchildren would suffer because of your unfaithfulness.

That is not a typical feature in my sermons, punishing children for sins they did not commit. And yet here it is sitting inside the most distinctive moral code of Judaism and Christianity. Later in the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet rejects this idea, saying that the one who sins would be punished. Talmudic scholars would also reconcile the text by opining that it is only if the children follow the wickedness of their parents that they would suffer. Which messages I both get and I agree with, but I will simply add that Ezekiel and these medieval Jewish scholars are flatly rejecting a passage from the Torah.

Can you do that? Should you do that?

Is it a majority decision or can only Ezekiel squeeze it in between his visions about chariots of fire?

I would say that we as followers of a tradition have the power to interpret that tradition. And, as and when necessary, we can step away from some aspect of the tradition because it seems necessary or because it stands in conflict to a higher truth. When we place priorities on the teachings we have received, as we will inevitably do, one may override another. And the sins of the parents being visited upon the fourth generation, that is inconsistent with most strains of modern Judaism and Christianity.

The other part that was missing, verses 10 and 11, seems less dramatic, almost like it was edited for length rather than message. It follows the requirement to keep the Sabbath day holy and it reads as follows:

But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Why leave this out? It explains the purpose of the sabbath and the basis for the restriction. I will hazard a guess that it has to do with one of the groups listed as having the sabbath day off. That would be one's slaves. We did hear about slaves in the tenth commandment, but that would have required a within sentence omission or dropping a whole commandment – neither step could be easily glossed over. Better to minimize and tighten things up, I suppose.

The Bible has many references to slaves, but we often do not hear them. They are edited like this one or skipped over entirely. Sometimes they are hidden beneath translations into English. Just to be clear, there is rarely anyone in the Bible who is just a “servant” or a “handmaid.” Those are usually euphemistic translations in place of the word “slave.”

The King James Version of the Bible rarely uses the word slave. It appears once in the Book of Jeremiah and one more time in the Book of Revelation. Perhaps that was to capture the master-servant relationship more familiar in 17th century England.

Or perhaps it was because of growing discomfort.

England would ban the domestic practice of slavery in 1772 and eliminate the slave trade throughout the empire in 1807. Not that colonialism and imperialism would stop, but the buying

and selling of human beings was no longer permitted in the British Empire. It would be a few decades until that happened closer to home.

Our painting this morning might be familiar. Trumbull's famous portrayal of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It appears in history books. It may have been hung on your classroom wall.

The painting is in what is called the Neoclassical style. This was an artistic reaction to the ornate and complicated Baroque and Rococo styles. It was inspired by the discovery of the ruins Pompeii, which led to the emulation of the cleaner and relatively more simple styles of Roman art found there. Not that anyone was skimping on grandeur. The massive domed Capitol Building in Washington, DC is in this style, but the shift was away from ornamentation. Roman architecture turned to columns and domes rather than gold adornments, which had been all the rage and then they simply became outdated and even considered a bit tacky. But these days anyone with a glue gun and a quick trip to Home Depot can recreate the gilded halls of Versailles, at least in theory.

Looking at our painting, it is almost subdued. Not a lot of action here. It was a catalogue of participants: who was there, who took part. Not everyone in the painting signed the Declaration and another 14 men who did were not depicted. Maybe they signed later. Or maybe Trumbull did not know what they looked like, as he was painting it in 1818 not 1776.

The men are in period dress. They are all in waistcoats and breeches. Neckties do not quite exist yet, but there were white cravats and something called a jabot with lots of frills. Some are wearing wigs, which was a symbol of class and wealth. The wearing of wigs fades away after the revolution as the newly freed citizens give up some of the trappings of English aristocracy. Sadly, that meant as a lawyer I never got to wear a wig like a British solicitor. A missed fashion opportunity for me.

As you look at these men, some are quite famous like John Hancock there in the chair, or like Thomas Jefferson, the tall man in the center in the red vest. John Adams is the short man in brown there to Jefferson's right. The rest are generally old, white men – no surprise there. To my knowledge there is only one Catholic man shown here, Charles Carroll from Maryland, the only one of the original colonies with a substantial Catholic population.

So, these are generally old, white, male Protestants. Protestants of several varieties, such as Congregationalists from up North, Anglicans from down South, and Quakers from places in the middle. None are known to be atheists, though Benjamin Franklin is there at Jefferson's left, and he and Jefferson were the closest to that philosophical disposition.

There is another characteristic common to most of these men which is less readily apparent. You would need to dig a little to discover this information. I must confess that I asked ChapGPT to find this answer, but I did follow up and look at less dubious sources.

In this painting, 34 of the 47 men shown owned slaves. For further context, and because not everyone who signed was depicted, of the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence of these United States, 41 of them owned slaves. The majority of those involved with founding of our nation owned people. Some others, including many Northerners, made money from slavery related matters, like distilling rum which of course relied upon sugar from plantations.

And, to further cloud our rosy colored historical glasses, twelve presidents of the United States owned slaves. Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and so forth. Many were Southern plantation owners, but others simply had one or two “servants” as we understand that euphemism from the Bible.

A thirteenth president, James Buchanan, is an honorable mention because he purchased two enslaved people, a mother and young daughter, from his relatives with the specific intention of freeing them. That freedom took seven years because at the time Pennsylvania required a gradual process of manumission, meaning the freeing of enslaved people, as some sort of social safety valve. Buchanan however politically defended slavery throughout his time in office and was thought to be the worst president in our nation’s history. That is until quite recently.

James Wilson, another signer from North Carolina, would go on to become a member of the United States Supreme Court as a justice. He enslaved someone for 26 years. It would seem that justice and independence were far more malleable terms than I ever imagined. Wilson, by the way, was one of the people who advocated for the three fifths rule, the constitutional provision that used three fifths of a state’s enslaved population to calculate representation in Congress, notwithstanding that those people were clearly not entitled to vote.

I mention all of this because when I looked at this painting in the past, it elicited feelings of pride in my country. And I am still proud that the United States is a democracy and that in time it was able to cast off its bleak history of slavery, if not every enduring characteristic of racism. I am still able to have pride in my homeland without ignoring the enduring faults of our nation.

We might think about this as a distinction between two often conflated ideas, patriotism and nationalism. These are not the same by a longshot. An American journalist Sydney Harris once wrote, “The difference between patriotism and nationalism is that the patriot is proud of his country *for what it does*, and the nationalist is proud of his country *no matter what it does...*” I am proud of my country, but not proud of every aspect of its history.

Given the example of many of our Founding Fathers and their complicity with slavery, it should not be surprising that slavery was enshrined in our Constitution until the 1860s. Why? Because it was normal for them. And yet these very same men in this painting were trying to do something very *not* normal to them, breaking away as an independent nation. The cognitive dissonance is a bit overwhelming for me, honestly, but human beings are truly complex.

These men, these patriots, these founders of a nation were using the philosophy of the Enlightenment period, and specifically the philosophical teachings of John Locke, to design a new form of government. And yet these high-minded universal ideas were somehow woefully curtailed when put into practice.

What were those ideas? Life, liberty, and property. Locke sought to protect one’s life, one’s freedom, and one’s personal property. The English king had a bad habit of treading on all three, so there was a logic behind his list. Notice however that last one, property, changed in the second paragraph of the Declaration. The clause becomes life, liberty, and the *pursuit of happiness* in the document, even though that is not what Locke wrote about.

Why did it change? Because life, liberty, and property are an easy thing to promise a room full of old, white, Protestant men who were also all relatively wealthy. It would have been far harder to

rally the troops, so to speak, among the working classes if you were promising more wealth for the wealthy. And so, the pursuit of happiness was added.

Notice it is the pursuit, not the *promise* of happiness. You still have to labor under the good old Protestant work ethic. Or in the case of the majority of the Founding Fathers, the forced work ethic of untold numbers of enslaved people working for a bunch of Protestants.

What should we do with such historical insights? Over the past couple of decades, there have been efforts to spell out the more complicated history of the United States. Confederate statues have been taken down or relocated. Historical sites like southern plantations have exhibited not just the fancy mansions but also the squalid quarters of those enslaved.

Here in Boston, there has been a roiling debate about renaming Fanueil Hall because Peter Fanueil, its namesake, was active in the slave trade. One of my Unitarian colleagues has been doggedly trying to have the building renamed.

I must confess that the renaming of buildings is not the first thing that comes to mind when I consider how to respond to the legacy of slavery in the United States. I think there are other things we need to do first, because practically speaking you only get to achieve so many things politically before the social pendulum shifts. So, you need to choose.

When I went to vote the other day in Brookline, I headed to the building I thought was called the Heath School which had unbeknownst to me been renamed the Roland Hayes School in 2023 – obviously I have not been paying attention. You see, John Heath had been a slave owner. Roland Hayes was a Black composer and tenor who lived in Brookline for 50 years until the 1970s. I must confess that I was unaware of this renaming effort. I did not know anything about John Heath or Roland Hayes until I went looking after the election. Again, not paying attention.

One of the motivations for renaming buildings is to avoid Black people seeing the history of oppressors preserved while their own history remains hidden. And I completely sympathize with that goal, but again I wonder if that is where I want to place efforts to address a troubling history and an ongoing legacy of racism.

Do I rename buildings or do I change the distorted economic system?

Distorted how? In 2018, there was an investigation into the lending practices of major banks in the Philadelphia real estate market. The Federal Reserve Bank looked at over 30 million real estate loans and determined that Black loan applicants in Philadelphia were *three times* as likely to be denied a loan as white applicants with identical financial profiles. Even the houses owned by Black folks are valued a third lower, further restricting their ability to sell or to refinance their homes.

I realize that we can do more than one thing at a time. And in a perfect world, you should be able to fix all the bad things without prioritizing. But I also realize from long and sad experience that you do not get everything you want. And if I must prioritize between the current economic situation of Black folks and the symbolism of building names to address historical white privilege, I think we would be better off focusing on the economics.

And I am not personally making that choice on behalf of others. In 2024, I graduated from my doctorate program at Boston University. And one of my required classes was about the role of

American and European foreign aid in Africa. The professor was lovely, though I was a bit confused as to how that course was a requirement for a degree in ministry. But I digress.

The provision of aid, depending upon how it is managed and administered, may have more negative consequences than benefits. By filling a need with aid rather than assisting the creation of homegrown economic capacity, the target countries' economic situations get no better and the risk of government corruption increases. Why corruption? Controlling the flow of aid becomes politically more important than, for example, developing industrial capacity.

Now that does not mean I agree with the wholesale closure of USAID and most aid programs. There are however better ways of managing aid and shifting the focus toward local resilience. But a seeming good thing can have negative effects and awareness of those negative effects is the starting point.

And when I surveyed my classmates at BU, two thirds of whom were Black, most of them questioned practices like renaming buildings and even reparations conversations when the economic system of the United States remains terribly unbalanced and systematically racist. That is merely one cluster of opinions, but one that was striking to me.

In the United States, slavery was a moral stain upon our nation's collective soul. But it was also an economic catastrophe. A small group of landowners became wealthy while the entire Southern United States fell well behind the economic progress of the North. There was no incentive to change an economic system familiar in the Roman Empire or even from the pages of the Bible. And so, not only was slavery morally bankrupt, it was economically bankrupt.

There was no good reason to protect slavery other than protecting men like the Founding Fathers who did not feel it necessary to disturb their comfort and wealth. And yes, I am not ignoring the centuries of misery visited upon people stolen from their home countries and forced into lives of forced labor as subhuman property. Bad things can be doubly bad.

And so, we changed. It took the bloodiest war in American history, but we changed. It took a mixed bag of efforts, stalling in during the 19th century Reconstruction period and restarting a century later during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. But still, there was change. More change is needed, clearly as 2018 is not vaguely remote in time. But change was and is possible.

We can change.

Now, what about the Bible? Did you think I was skipping that part this morning?

In the Ten Commandments, the existence of slaves is taken for granted. They are afforded the right not to work on the sabbath – great – but not the right not to be slaves – not so great. The New Testament is filled with examples of slavery. The language of slavery is used as a metaphor to describe the relationship between the people and God. And that Biblical language about slavery was used, chapter and verse, to support the continuation of slavery in the United States during the 19th century.

And I will tell you my heartfelt belief. The language of the Bible is wrong. The acceptance of slavery as culturally normal, the protection of slavery as an idea, is fundamentally wrong. It is immoral. And it seems to arise because it was simply a social given rather than a social choice.

Slavery is inconsistent with the message of Jesus, who yes at times made assumptions about slaves in the world around him. But relying upon the words of Jesus and extending them to their logical conclusion, no one can be a slave. Ever or for any reason.

No one can be classed or defined as anything other than a child of God, with the equal rights to life, liberty, and happiness described by John Locke in his description of the inalienable rights of human beings. Rights that are inherent, rights that can never be taken away by either tyrants or legislation or a church.

And, again, the Bible should be no basis for hedging against those rights. We are all free or no one is truly free, for inequality and inequity are cancers within a civilized society. They corrode the commonality of society, they render democracy a lie.

Does that mean everyone should be able to vote – yes. What about prisoners – yes. What about immigrants – yes. If you are expected to pay taxes to support the government, then you should be able to petition the government and to choose the government that spends those taxes. “No taxation without representation” was a slogan from the American Revolution.

I could offer a dozen sermons on the question of citizenship and the failed system of immigration we currently have, but I will leave it at this today: human beings should be free and human beings should be able to participate in how they are governed. That is straight from the pages of John Locke but also straight from the language of the Declaration of Independence and the lips of American patriots. We were founded on these ideas.

And, by the way, a section was removed from the final text of the Declaration of Independence. Text that alleged that the King of England had been engaged in a cruel war against nature itself by capturing and selling human beings. That language about the sin of slavery was later omitted by the Continental Congress because of the South’s policy of slavery and the North’s complicity in slave-based economics.

But the stunning irony of that language was not its content or its inclusion, but its source: Thomas Jefferson wrote it. Thomas Jefferson, who was a lifelong slave owner, whose prevailing economic self-interest and, frankly, his personal selfishness overcame his Enlightenment era philosophical objections. I will skip over the full catalogue of his sins in the interest of decorum.

As a patriot, I can admire Jefferson’s work, and I can deplore many aspects of how he lived. For similar reasons, we should not attempt to distort history or gloss over its less attractive aspects to make us feel better about ourselves in the present. The sins of our great-great plus grandparents are not our sins, but their lingering effects remain ours to sort out.

As such, when the time presents itself, we should consider the moral and ethical boundaries of our sincerely held political, philosophical, and religious beliefs. And when a page needs to be turned, or an idea cast aside, or even an old sin brought into the light, we need to be ready.

We need to be ready to change.

We can cherish our history, our nation, and the Bible. But we must do so with wide open eyes. And we need to do so with a healthy respect for the dignity of our fellow human beings. Each and every one of whom is a beloved child of God. Each and every one of whom deserves to live freely and to live happily. Amen.