

**An Invisible History ©**  
**A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel**  
**at The North Parish, Unitarian Universalist, of North Andover, MA**  
**Heritage Sunday, October 23, 2016**  
**Celebrating the 371<sup>st</sup> Year of the Congregation**  
**and the 180<sup>th</sup> year of the Fifth Meeting House**

*“Many of our personal identities and theologies would shock our religious ancestors. They did not dream us, unless in their worst nightmares.” – the Rev. Dr. Susan Richie, UU*

*“Know this, you of the future, you with your libraries and fountains, you in your star cities. Know that even in our slumbers, we dreamed... It was for you we dreamed!” – the Rev. John Cummins, UU*

In 1730, almost a century after the founding of this congregation, the third minister of North Parish sold one of his slaves to a member of the congregation for 60 pounds. That’s right—the minister, Rev. John Barnard, sold a human being, as did other “upstanding” members of the congregation, including Colonial James Frye, who advertised a “boy” for sale in 1770.

Reverend Barnard sold a girl, Candace, and the bill of sale said that he did “give, grant, convey and confirm unto him, the said Benjamin Stevens, his heirs and Assigns *forever* a certain Negro girl named Candace, to have and to hold, *forever*.” They seemed to use that word, “forever”, a lot, when it came to owning property.

You will notice Rev. John Barnard’s name in the list of ministers at the bottom of the stairs going into the Parish Hall. You might notice Benjamin Stevens’ name as the donor of one of the silver tankards that make up our communion silver, which is kept at the Museum of Fine Art but is described in the framed poster downstairs in Parish Hall.

You will not see Candace's name anywhere in the building—  
not even as a footnote on our posters to remind us that these two white men,  
Barnard and Stevens, could preach and give silver  
in part because of her free labor.  
It gives me pause to stand in the trajectory of this American story,  
and to reflect that our nation has never fully come to terms  
with its two original sins— chattel slavery and the genocide of Native peoples.

As a nation, we hold up some chapters of our history,  
but other parts have become invisible.  
Some chapters we memorialize and some we forget to mention,  
some we silence, some we deny and some we simply forget.  
And perhaps at North Parish we are much the same.

The history of this congregation offers a remarkable microcosm  
of the evolution of our nation from before its founding to the present.  
Like all institutions founded by English men centuries ago,  
the congregation was born with institutional racism and sexism in its DNA.  
This is the downside of begin part of something that's been around a long time:  
you simply can't claim perfect innocence.

Making the invisible visible again is not about guilt.  
It's about taking a first step towards truth and healing.  
You see, when parts of our history are forgotten, personally or communally,  
we tend to overlook their impact on the present.  
We overlook the ways that this history is still playing out,  
or the reasons for economic and social inequality.  
We overlook our deep need for healing on the personal, spiritual,  
congregational and national level.  
We overlook the depths of one another's pain.

As much as we might like too, we just can't skip over that pain.  
As I said last week, the only path to healing involves walking right through grief.  
If you try to avoid it you just end up back where you started,  
with a long, long way to go.  
But don't take it from me, take it from a fellow Unitarian Universalist  
and candidate for the ministry, Adam Lawrence Dyer,  
author of the UU meditation manual *Love Beyond God*. He writes this:

*"Don't speak to me of "healing" racism, or "wounded souls" or the "painful hurt"  
until you are willing to feel the scars on my great-great grandmother Laury's back.  
Don't speak to me of "values" or "justice" or "righting wrongs"  
until you are able to feel the heartache of my great-grandfather Graham  
whose father may have been his master.*

*Don't speak to me of "equity" or "opportunity" or the "common good"  
until you are able to hear the fear from my grandmother Mae  
as the only black woman at her college.*

*Don't speak to me of "passion" or "longing" or "standing on the side of love"  
until you know the shame felt by my mother Edwina,  
mocked by teachers for the curve of her back.*

*Don't speak to me of "together" or "understanding" or "empathy"  
until you know my rage as a young actor hearing the direction  
to "be more black... more male."*

*The pain you are trying to heal has no real name.  
This "pain" you speak of has no story; it is anonymous, vague and empty.*

*Don't speak to me of "healing" for I heal the second I am ripped apart.  
My wounds self-suture, and like the clever creature I am,  
I just grow new legs to outrun the pain even faster.*

*It is something I have had to practice for generations that feel like an eternity.  
So, please don't speak to me of "healing"  
because you cannot know what healing means until you know the hurt."*

**You can not know what healing means until you know the hurt.**

So where does the hurt lie in our congregation's past?

Let's take a quick look at two chapters of our collective history.

We might start at the beginning, or *before* the beginning.

As it says in our order of service, the congregation was started by Puritans in 1645, but the Puritans did not "discover" this place.

Does anyone know who was here first?

The Pennacook. The Pennacook people, also called Pawtucket, lived on the lower part of the Merrimack River.

But their story is invisible to us today thanks to disease, guns and war—much of it thanks to European settlers.

The impact of this history is still seen today in places like Standing Rock, North Dakota, where 80 people were arrested just yesterday protesting a pipeline that crosses their sacred land.

Twenty-five years before the congregation began, in 1620, the Pennacook were a large, independent Confederacy—at one point numbering 12,000 people in 30 villages along the Merrimack River. Since they were inland, they had little contact with Europeans *before* 1620.

But then the epidemics began, brought by English slave traders who had come ashore in 1614, and in some cases, with likely intentional germ warfare through the distribution of smallpox infected blankets. It took a few years, but the contagion moved inland.

There was smallpox in 1631- 1635, again in 1639. After the congregation was founded there were more epidemics— influenza in 1647, more smallpox in 1649 and diphtheria in 1659. 75 to 100% of those in Pennacook villages died.

Meanwhile, in 1642, a sachem- or leader- of the Pennacook named Wanalancet was taken prisoner by the English for two years. He was released in 1644 only after the Pennacook signed a treaty of submission to Massachusetts. The sale of this land—which became known as Andover—took place just one year after this formal act of submission.

The congregation's first minister, the Rev. John Woodbridge and the freeholder Edmond Faulkner are given credit for brokering the deal. Rev. Woodbridge had made an urgent request to the Court for the land on behalf of certain men of Newbury and Ipswich, some of whom, we read, had "sold themselves out of house and home, and so desire to be settled as soon as possible." They needed a place to go.

How many of you know how much the honorable minister offered? Six pounds and a coat. The land has gained a bit in value since!

The deal did allow a Pennacook named Roger to take alewives from the river, and to use the four acres of land where he was planting. But if he was ever to steal any corn or other fruits of the English inhabitants, we read, "this liberty of taking fish shall *forever* cease." We read, "This purchase ye Court allowed and have granted ye said land to... ye said plantation *forever*..." Have you noticed how much the English used the word *forever* when it came to owning property?

The purchase is captured in the picture upon the Andover town seal. Some might say it is an image romanticizing a "deal" that took total complete advantage of the decimation, poverty and defeat of the Pennacook people.

By 1675, the Pennacook numbered 1,200-- ten percent of what they had been. After 1676, thirty years after the congregation began, they were forced to abandon the lower Merrimack River and Massachusetts for good.

They went north but continued to die.  
By the end of King Phillips' War in 1677, there were about 600 Pennacook left.  
They then faced the King Williams War from 1689-97  
and the Queen Ann's War from 1701-1713.  
In the end, the remaining Pennacook fled north to Vermont and Canada.  
They became part of the Abenaki people,  
continuing as the St. Francois Indians, the Becancour Abenaki and Vermont Abenaki.

You will notice Rev. John Woodbridge's name in the list of ministers  
at the bottom of the stairs going into the Parish Hall.  
You will not see Roger's name or that of the Pennacook people  
anywhere in the building—  
not even as a footnote to remind us that Rev. Woodbridge and the freeholders  
bought the land for a song.

There is nothing to note the history of disease, guns and war-  
or the practice of kidnapping as a means to force submission.

**To speak of healing, we need to know this hurt.**

Another chapter that we need to know about is the one I mentioned  
at the start of the sermon—  
slavery and the subsequent segregation of African-Americans  
and its lasting impact financially, socially, institutionally, spiritually.  
This conversation is happening all around us.

On the national level, it has been brought to the fore  
by the Black Lives Matter movement and the national best seller  
by Ta-nehisi Coates called *Between the World and Me*,  
which is a community read book for the town of Andover this year.

In our denomination, the conversation is being led by a new collective  
called BLUU or Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism,  
which was just recently awarded a 5 million dollar grant from the UUA Board.

Here at North Parish, our history with slavery is a good long one. Slavery became legal in Massachusetts in 1641, four years before the North Parish congregation was established. It was legal for 142 years, ending in 1783. So for the first 138 years of the congregation, our people had slaves.

We know about the young slave I mentioned earlier, Candace, because of a bill of sale, transcribed in Julia Mofford's book of our history. The names of most of the other slaves of the congregation are lost.

Of course, the legal end of slavery in our state didn't mean the end of our history as a segregated institution. We know from a series of recorded votes that *for 42 years* after slavery was ended, African-Americans fought to sit in the pews. Instead, they were segregated in a small, upper gallery, close under the eaves.

I covered much of this history in a sermon back in 2010, which you can read on our website in the history section. You'll be relieved to know that I won't repeat it all here.

Suffice it to say that the votes went like this: In 1766, it was voted that English women who married or associated with African-American or "mulatto" men had to sit with the black women. 31 years later, in 1797, it was voted that only Englishmen could purchase pews- even though local blacks had been free for 14 years. Six years later, In 1803, this same thing was voted, again. 22 years later, in 1825, still another vote was taken.

This time, we read that "ten feet in the east end of the side gallery was appropriated for the use of colored people." 180 years after our founding, blacks could finally purchase pews, but segregation was still firmly in place.

Part of my previous sermon about our black history focused on the story of Cato Freeman

who began his life as a slave but as a young adult became free and spent many years as part of the congregation.

Cato was married here, his kids were baptized; he played the viol for services.

It seems he *may* have been able to become a voting member in 1780s.

His wife Lydia would have had to wait another 100 years.

It was not until 1887 that women could become voting members.

You can't find Cato's or Lydia's names anywhere in the building— not even a quotation of his eloquent words of Universalist witness, written in a letter to his former master.

In that letter he spoke of a God, a heaven as a “haven of rest where (there) is no Distinctions.”

In one deft sentence, he pointed out the chasm between Universalist theology and the reality of the congregation's actions here on earth.

Despite his life-long association with the congregation, segregation followed Cato and Lydia to the grave.

They are buried in a segregated part of our burial ground up the road.

**To speak of healing, we need to know this hurt.**

We have beautiful posters on the Parish Hall walls about some select pieces of our history—

the Paul Revere bell, the communion silver, the footstools.

But maybe it's time to add a memorial about a man named Roger and the other Pennacook people whose names we do not know.

Maybe it's time to add a memorial about a girl named Candace and the other slaves whose names we do not know.

Maybe it's time to add a memorial about Cato and Lydia Freeman, and their Universalist faith that went deeper than the congregation's.

Maybe it's time to lift up our invisible history and use it in the service of an inclusive future. If you'd like to work on that, let me know.



Our political ancestors did *not* envision an inclusive nation.  
Our religious ancestors did *NOT* envision an inclusive congregation.  
But that doesn't mean that *we* don't, or can't.  
As the Rev. Dr. Susan Richie said in the reading,  
a lot has changed since the early days of our congregations,  
thanks to the people in the pews.

They saw that the covenant- the love of God and of the people-  
was not reserved for the elect.  
It wasn't reserved for the English Puritan men and later the English Christian men  
who made money off the land and their slaves,  
and controlled and led the congregation quite literally for centuries.  
The people in the pews saw that the covenant- the love of God and the people-  
could extend to all who desired its embrace.

Indeed, as she notes, our religious ancestors  
would be shocked- shocked!- by most of our identities or theologies.  
As she says, they could not have dreamed us up, except in their worst nightmares!  
(The Rev. John Woodbridge could not have dreamed *me* up  
in his worst nightmare for sure!)

So it is still our job to turn nightmares of oppression and exclusion  
into dreams of love and inclusion,  
and then turn those dreams into reality today.

In four more years, North Parish will celebrate its 375<sup>th</sup> birthday-  
the same year as the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pilgrim's arrival in 1620.  
Our 375<sup>th</sup> is a big one! Worth a big party. It's a birthday to start thinking about.

Four more years.  
What do we want to accomplish? What ministries, what conversations?  
Who do we want to reach out to, to let them know they belong?  
In our life together, may we live the answers. Amen

**Reading:** excerpt from *Let the Wrong Ones In* by the Rev. Dr. Susan Riche

We often speak of the mantle of leadership as involving an inheritance from the past. We sing that “what they dreamed be ours to do,” and speak of torches given to our temporary care as they travel from the past to the future.

Yet in a progressive religious tradition, this is especially challenging. Most of our personal identities and theologies would shock our religious ancestors. They did not dream us, unless in their worst nightmare...

Somewhere along the line, someone left this tradition open for me. Someone invited me in, someone made the way for me, even though there was no equivalent for me in our forebears’ imagination...

In the early days of American congregationalism, membership in the church was tightly controlled. The covenant of membership was restricted to the saints: those who were destined for heaven and who could prove it before a parsimonious clergy and a small number of pious church members.

But many of the people in the pews refused this narrow view. When the minister preached about how the covenant—the very love of God and the love of the people—was reserved for the elect, the people heard something different. They heard the offer of covenant extended to all who desired its embrace. Eventually, this generosity led to a different church: a church with doors held open wide, our church.

And it is *this* spirit that I imagine speaking to us, saying:  
*Remind us of how for all but five minutes of our history we have been the wrong people.*  
*Help us to identify, name, and invite all the wrong people*  
*who may, in fact, turn out to be right.*  
*Show us those who need our invitation to participate in a whole and holy humanity.*  
*May your leadership be one of radical hospitality and inclusion.*

**Reading:** Excerpt from *Letter to the People of the Future*, by Rev. John Cummins

My Distant Children:

You will look back on us with astonishment at the truths that stared us in the face, and which we did not see. It will seem strange beyond believing that we reached for the stars and did not know the simplest of principles of living well together.

But know this also, you of the future, you with your libraries and fountains, you in your star cities. Know that even in our slumbers, we dreamed. In our fumbling... it was for you that we dreamed!

In that far age... it will be your source of pride that your ancestors, born into a universe without justice or mercy, bethought themselves of justice and mercy, and put them there!

Remember us for this.