

John F. Carter  
September 20, 2009

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Pentecost 20

## DAY OF AWARENESS

In the name of God the Creator,  
Whose banishment of Adam and Eve  
Freed them to make choices  
And to travel the road of consciousness;  
*Let your people go.*

In the name of God the Emancipator,  
Who freed the Hebrew slaves in Egypt  
That they might wander, grow strong,  
And learn that dependence upon God is grace;  
*Let your people go.*

In the name of Jesus the Savior,  
Who liberated us from self-centeredness  
and from the chains of death;  
And in whose service lies perfect freedom;  
*Let your people go.*

Amen

Today is an important Sunday at St. John's. First, the Choir is back to enhance the beauty and spirit of our worship at the 10:00 service. Second, we begin Church School today. In today's gospel, Jesus takes a little child, holds him in his arms and says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."

Third, the hangings are back on the altar, lectern and pulpit.

Beyond these seasonal shifts, today is a "Day of Awareness". What does this mean?

Earlier this summer, Bishop Smith wrote to all the parishes in the Diocese and asked them to observe a day of education and consciousness-raising regarding the history of slavery in Connecticut. By now, you may have read the report on this topic by Parish Newsletter Editor, Gaile Binzen. In accordance with the Bishop's request, Gaile convened a committee to research the history of slavery in Salisbury. This is a truly intriguing exploration. I note that most of my

sources are from links provided by the Diocese. The process of education at individual parishes will culminate in a service of repentance at Christ Church Cathedral on November 7<sup>th</sup>.

We tend to find affirmation, or at least confirmation, of our own identities when we look back to our ancestors. The Daughters and Sons of the Revolution are examples of social and historical institutions that find value, status and prestige in their present circumstances through association with honored ancestors. Of course, there are many less formalized ways that we all do this. Oral histories and anecdotal accounts of deceased relatives add a flavor of folklore to how we see ourselves. "Remember how Grandpa Bill busted up the fight at the legislature?" Etc.

Looking back, we may discover causes for pride or shame, notoriety or celebrity. Stories tend to improve over time, becoming smooth and polished.

What if we looked back over the generations and discovered that we are descendants of slave-owners? How would we see ourselves? Is there blessing or curse in this knowledge? On the other hand, how would it feel to look back and see that one's great-great grandparents were slaves? What curse or blessing accompanies this knowledge? In either case, roots are important to us.

Curious about my own in colonial Connecticut, I investigated members of one branch of my family in Lyme. I discovered that some of my early forbearers had slaves there. In the Ely family graveyard, there is headstone with this epitaph:

"Here lyeth the body of William Ely b.1698  
Died in the 60<sup>th</sup> year of his Life 4 Mar 1758...  
He was the first among us to free his slaves"

Other records suggest this liberation may have been neither immediate nor comprehensive. Documents reveal that William Ely's son, Samuel, freed his slave, Peter in 1781, 23 years after his father's death. Peter's freedom, as in the case of many "freed" slaves, was not free. It would cost Peter 30 pounds in silver.

I infer from the epitaph on William Ely's gravestone that William was not alone in owning slaves in Lime. "There are other primary documents (Dr. John Pfeiffer article) showing that slavery was an important social and economic activity throughout the town." A census of Lime in 1800 shows that a population of 4380 souls included "108 recently freed blacks".

New Englanders may be surprised or even shocked to discover that the institution of slavery had a strong foothold in the North during Colonial times as well as after the revolution for independence in 1776. Many slave-owning settlers from England were adhering to the practice of slavery as they knew it back

home. They continued to do here what was still legal in England and in the colonies.

Following the Civil War, there was considerable effort to sanitize the North's complicity in slavery before the war. For Yankees, Reconstruction meant taking a revisionist pen to history. For a long time many Northerners found some self-righteous elevation in pointing the finger of blame down at the South.

But the reality is quite different. The first slaves in the colony were Pequot Indians. Gaile Binzen reports in her article, "By the eve of the Revolution, a quarter of all adult men owned slaves in Connecticut. While half of these men were farmers, traders and merchants, the rest included half of all the ministers, lawyers, and public officials, and a third of all the doctors."

The first record of a particular African slave in the Colony of Connecticut goes back to 1639. His name was Louis Berbice. He was murdered by his owner in Hartford. Many scholars assert that slavery existed here as early as 1620.

The Browne plantation in Salem, CT had 60 individual slaves. A very large, 3000 acre farm in Pomfret had 27 slaves. "The inventory of living creatures at the Pomfret farm listed 80 cows, 45 oxen, 30 steers, 59 young cattle, 6 horses, 600 sheep, 150 hogs and 27 negroes, in that order."

Elijah Mason was a Lebanon farmer and slave master. According to the first federal census of 1790, 6 years after the Gradual Abolition Act, Mason owned 28 slaves.

James Scovill, an Episcopal minister in Waterbury had at least two slaves in his household, Dick and Phyllis. Dick was taken captive in Africa probably during the 1750s. When Scovill moved to Canada in 1788, he left Dick with his son, Peter Scovill. Dick lived to be at least 90, outliving all those who had held him as property."

Connecticut passed the *Gradual Abolition Act* in 1784. As one might surmise from the law's name, it did not abolish slavery right away. There were caveats and stipulations. The Gradual Abolition Act freed children of six years and younger, but required older siblings to remain slaves until their 21<sup>st</sup> or 25<sup>th</sup> birthdays. Since they were seen as "property", they often had to pay a considerable sum for their release. Parents were not given their freedom. The last slaves in Connecticut were freed in 1848, sixty-four years after the Gradual Abolition Act went in to effect.

Much of the prosperity and accumulation of considerable wealth of the colony-then-state was built on the backs of slaves. For the larger farms and plantations the financial benefits of slavery were twofold. Not only did slaves provide labor to produce crops, but also the crops were then shipped and sold for a substantial profit to slave owners in the West Indies where there were millions of slaves.

One interesting regional story surfaced in my research. In 1862, following *The Emancipation Proclamation*, 80 black freeman (some presumably former slaves), as members of the “29<sup>th</sup> Colored Regiment”, marched from Litchfield County to fight for the North and for the end of slavery. Recently, African American descendants of the 29<sup>th</sup> Colored Regiment, having found “no monuments, no statues and no churches in their memory”, took up the cause to honor them. A monument was unveiled in Criscuolo Park in New Haven a year ago, after 150 years of oblivion.

Litchfield County towns and families of black soldiers were hard-hit by the Civil War. Canaan, for instance, sent four men and only one returned. In Colebrook, 6 went to war and 4 failed to come home.

Connecticut is the wealthiest state in the union. Some of that accumulated and inherited wealth is derived from slavery. This is true for Episcopalian families, including my own, as it is also true for the Diocese of Connecticut. Some church endowments and trust funds can be traced directly to the institution of slavery.

Part of the legacy of slavery today is the powerful undertow of racism in our political, religious and economic culture. Acknowledging a history of corporate complicity is the first step towards deepening a Christian commitment to justice today.

Why have a *Day of Awareness*? Because only by becoming aware can we act in new ways. Giving up familiar perceptions of our lives can be uncomfortable, even painful. It is natural to resist and even defy new knowledge because it usually points to change.

We turn again now to Jesus’ attention to the little child. He invites us to become like little children, open and trusting, being smart about the kingdom of earth while opening up to the kingdom of heaven.

It took Anglican Priest John Newton thirty-four years to fully renounce his former profession of slave ship captain. He reports the final phase of his conversion in his confessional work, *“Thoughts Upon the Slave Trade”*, published in 1788. In this forceful pamphlet, he recalls with shame the horrific conditions of the slave ships during the middle passage from Africa to the West Indies. He apologizes for “a confession that comes too late.” “It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.”

One could say that Newton grew backwards spiritually over the years, shedding a defensive and guilty understanding of his life, while regaining the innocence and honesty of a child. Newton’s repentance was honest, vulnerable and fully public. His reformed faith led him to be strong leader in the Abolitionist

movement in England. Awareness empowers. Newton's conversion completed, he could write the lyrics we know so well,

"I once was lost, but now am found,  
was blind but now I see"

## APPENDIX I

"In 1807 the slave trade in the British colonies was abolished and it became illegal to carry slaves in British ships. This was only the beginning: the ultimate aim was the abolition of slavery itself.

In 1815 at the Congress of Vienna, European statesmen condemned slavery but nothing was done to improve the conditions of slaves. The campaign to abolish slavery continued in Britain. Wilberforce and his co-workers held meetings all over the country to try to persuade people that abolition should be supported. They discovered that many people were unaware of the horrors of slavery and that others were not interested in something that happened thousands of miles away. They also met opposition from the West India lobby." (This lobby no doubt represented commercial interests of the sugar cane plantation owners.)

"After 1830 when the mood of the nation changed in favour of a variety of types of reform, the antislavery campaign gathered momentum. In 1833 Wilberforce's efforts were finally rewarded when the Abolition of Slavery Act was passed. Wilberforce, on his deathbed, was informed of the passing of the Act in the nick of time. The main terms of the Act were:

- % All slaves under the age of six were to be freed immediately
- % Slaves over the age of six were to remain as part slave and part free for a further four years. In that time they would have to be paid a wage for the work they did in the quarter of the week when they were "free"
- % The government was to provide £20 million in compensation to the slave-owners who had lost their "property."

## APPENDIX II

The story of James Mars (1790-1880) of Canaan, a slave whose story is told in Five Black Lives.

In his own words,

“My father was born in the State of New York, I think in Columbia County. He had, I think, three different masters in that State, one by the name of Vanepps, and he was Gen. Van Rensaeller's slave in the time of the Revolution, and was a soldier in that war; he was then owned by a man whose name was Rutser, and then was owned in Connecticut, in Salisbury, and then by the minister in North Canaan.

My mother was born in old Virginia, in Loudin county; I do not remember the name of the town. The minister of North Canaan, whose name was Thompson, went to Virginia for a wife, or she came to him; in some way they got together, so that they became man and wife. He removed her to Canaan, and she brought her slaves with her, and my mother was one of them. I think there were two of my mother's brothers also. The Rev. Mr. Thompson, as he was then called, bought my father, and he was married to my mother by him. Mr. Thompson ministered to the people of Canaan in holy things; while slaves worked his farm.”

Continuing with an article about James Mars, “James refused to follow his master to Virginia, where he would have been denied the emancipation guaranteed him at age twenty-five under Connecticut law. With the help of the white citizens of Norfolk, Connecticut, Mars successfully evaded his master’s attempts to kidnap and smuggle him across state lines. In his later life, he enjoyed a prominent place in New England’s African American community. During the 1830s, Mars worked in a dry goods store in Hartford, Connecticut, and served as a deacon in the Talcott Street Congregational Church. He also played an important part in the African American enfranchisement and temperance movements. Mars was a principal in the 1837 landmark case Jackson v. Bulloch, in which the Connecticut Supreme Court granted slave Nancy Jackson her freedom after two years of residency in the state with her Georgia master, James Bulloch. Around 1845, Mars moved his wife and eight children to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he stayed for twenty years before returning to Norfolk and publishing *Life of James Mars* (1864).

