

In Honor of Black History Month: Frederick Douglass: Part I

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In 1976 Black History month was officially established in America for the month of February,

partly because of the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass.

I will venture to say that many of us know about President Lincoln.

How many of you know about Frederick Douglas?

I confess that I knew very little about Frederick Douglass.

I have spent the last month reading about Douglass, educating myself about Douglass and becoming deeply inspired by him.

The context in which I preach about him this morning includes our UU value of Justice, one of six UU values surrounding our UU faith, centered in Love.

Here is the description of our UU value of Justice found in Article II of the UUA By-laws:

Justice. We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive.

We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression.

We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregations, our Association and society at large.

In speaking about Frederick Douglass this morning,
 I am going to relate the story of his life up to his age of thirty-seven,
 when he published his second autobiography,
My Bondage and My Freedom.
 In a following sermon, hopefully on February 16th,
 I will speak about Douglass, Lincoln, and failed Reconstruction.

Frederick Douglass lived through much of the 19th century.
 His is a courageous, inspiring story, told in great depth by David W.
 Blight
 in his Pulitzer Prize winning book
Frederick Douglass, Prophet of Freedom. 800 pages! Well worth it.
 Blight writes of Douglass' s life – that of a slave
 who became a lyrical prophet of freedom,
 natural rights, and human equality¹.

Born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, a slave in Talbot County,
 Maryland in February 1818,
 Douglass was the son of Harriet Bailey, a slave,
 and most likely his mother's white owner.
 Douglass sought his entire life to discover
 the identity of his father, to no avail.

¹ David Blight, Frederick Douglass, *Prophet of Freedom*, Kindle, 72.

As a very young child, his mother would walk twelve miles at night to see him, as she had been hired out to another farm.

She had to be back at her farm by sunrise or she would be severely punished.

She had to walk 24 miles to see her son.

She was only able to see him a handful of times, according to what Frederick could remember.

He had an important memory of her standing up for him against the brutal treatment of his master's cook who denied Frederick enough to eat.

She died when Frederick was eight or nine years old.

He was not allowed to see her when she was ill, not even after she died.

He later learned that his mother could read, the only slave in Tuckahoe, Maryland who could.

This is important, as he, against tremendous odds, would also learn how to read and write.

In his autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass states that being a child whose father was white and whose mother was a black slave did nothing to protect such a child, as he was.

He wrote: "A man who will enslave his own blood, may not be safely relied on for magnanimity.

Men do not love those who remind them of their sins."

...”What is still worse, perhaps such a child is a constant offense to the wife.

She hates its very presence, and when a slaveholding woman hates, (she) wants not means to give that hate telling effect.”²

Slavery, wrote Douglass, is the enemy of filial affection, breaking up families.

He knew of his brothers and sisters, but did not have close connections with them,

for they had been separated long before such bonds could form.

Almost miraculously, he went to live with his grandmother after his mother’s death,

and received from her the love he so desperately needed.

But when Douglass was about twelve,

his grandmother was forced to hand him over to his master.

One of the most wrenching passages of his writings (and there are many)

Is his writing of his grandmother’s treatment towards the end of her life.

No longer of any use, after a lifetime of caring service to Master Thomas,

she was deemed worthless, and placed in a hut in the woods,

to fend for herself. Douglass never knew what truly happened to her.

As a youngster Douglass wondered and thought a lot about

“why are some people slaves and others masters?

² Frederick Douglass. My Bondage and MY Freedom. New York: Penguin publishing, 1855. P. 46.

Why am I a slave? Was there ever a time when this was not so?"

He witnessed and later wrote about the brutality and violence of the slave system

he experienced in rural Maryland in shocking detail -.

the whippings, the murders, the rapes, the treating Blacks as non-human,

working them from sunrise to sundown,

with no rewards except the reward of no punishment.

He explained that slave masters were reluctant, in the end,

to main or kill a slave, as they viewed slaves as a valuable piece of property.

As a child he suffered greatly from hunger and even more from the cold.

He slept nights on the cold kitchen floor of his master's home.

He was seldom whipped during his early years.

Later in life, he would railed against the inhumane treatment of slaves in the south,

not being given enough to eat, not enough clothing, not enough shelter.

He felt that slaves were treated as if they were chattel, and only property,

and as a child, felt he was treated as an animal.

Douglas became, later in life, a great orator and writer,

We can see his brilliance and intelligence radiating from the pages of his three autobiographies and his speeches,

as he writes about the horrors of slavery.

He came to believe that both the slaveholder and the slave are the victims of the slave system.

He experienced several times in his young life what he labelled as the hand of Divine Providence.³

One was his being sent to live in Baltimore with his master Thomas' brother, Master Hugh.

Here Douglass was assigned to be the companion of Tommy, Master Hugh and his wife's son.

Here for the first time, he was treated with kindness by his mistress, who had never owned a slave before.

She taught him the alphabet and rudimentary reading.

This was stopped when Master Hugh discovered that Douglass was learning to read,

and Hugh's wife was then forced to treat him less kindly.

Not deterred, determined to learn how to read,

Douglass went out as a youth into the streets of Baltimore, when he had free time to play,

and found white children, who were more than willing to help him learn how to read.

These children had not yet learned to be prejudiced against a person of color.

³ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. New York: Penguin books, 1855. P. 105.

He also taught himself to write,

copiously copying the writing books of his young charge, writing from

Tommy's old writing copy books, as well as passages from the Bible - until he could indeed write as well as any white person.

Slaveholders found reading and writing

to be a very dangerous skill for a slave to have.

Douglass, for example, read about the north and the abolitionists and came then to dream of emancipation and escape from slavery.

A literate slave was a slaveholder's worst fear.

When Frederick had playtime in Baltimore,

he also attended Sunday services of a white Methodist minister,

Mr. Hanson, who preached that all are sinners in the sight of God, slave and slaveholders. This was a revelation for young Douglass.

And importantly next he found a spiritual guide

in a neighbor named Uncle Lawson,

A saintly Christian whom Douglass would visit when he could, especially on Sundays.

While Douglass could help Uncle Lawson better read scripture,

Uncle Lawson taught Douglas the spirit of the biblical texts.

Once Master Hugh found out about Douglas going to these meetings with Uncle Lawson, he strictly forbid him to do.

Douglas came then to see himself as being persecuted

by what he called “a wicked man,”

He went anyway, in spite of the threats of being whipped.

(He never was whipped by Master Hugh).

Uncle Lawson told Frederick that “the Lord had a great work for him to do.”

A prediction that proved to be very true.

Douglas’s religious conversion changed how he viewed life.

Although he abhorred slavery,

he came to believe that God did not intend for there to be slavery.

He was not destined by God to be a slave forever.

He wanted slavery to end and began to see this as his life mission.

His journey was not easy.

His old Master Thomas died, and he was called back to his former plantation

with one thousand other slaves, to be evaluated and then given either to Master Thomas’s son or his daughter Lucretia, as property equally divided.

Fortunately, as degraded as being evaluated was,

he became the property of Lucretia,

whose influence made it possible for him to return to Baltimore.

But then, Lucretia died, and her husband Captain Auld remarried.

A feud arose between Frederick’s master in Baltimore and the new master

of his old plantation.

Without any thought to his own life and its connections in Baltimore, Frederick was returned as piece of property to Tuckahoe.

He then began then to think about how to really escape from slavery.

He did not re-enter plantation life easily,

Because he was a slave who could read, and

who knew about the abolitionists and the possibility of his gaining freedom.

Because of inevitable conflict with Captain Auld,

Frederick at the age of 16 was sent to be broken as a slave

to the farm of Edward Covey,

whose reputation as a slave holder was to break

young blacks through flogging and brutal, violent treatment.

Douglass almost lost his battle with slavery here –

as he endured six months of beatings, starving, and being over worked.

Then, one summer day, after having what was most likely a sunstroke,

he could not get up when ordered by Covey to do so.

Covey beat him terribly with no mercy at all.

Douglass somehow was able to run off into the woods.

Here he was hiding, bleeding terribly, thinking he might die,

when a freed slave Sandy just happened to come by.

He took Douglass to his home, at great risk to himself and his wife,

fed him and cared for him.

Douglass wrote many years later

that the meal Sandy and his wife gave him

was “the meal, of all my life, most sweet to my taste, and now most vivid in my memory.”⁴

Sandy was a good advisor to Douglass. He was a genuine African, and shared with Douglass some of his beliefs about magical powers.

He advised Douglass to place an herb on the right side of his body,

Instructing that it would be impossible

for the slave-holder Covey to strike his body.

After two days rest, and having been fed,

Sandy urged Douglas to return to Covey’s farm,

believing that the root herb would protect him.

When Frederick did return, he had resolved to fight Covey

if he tried to punish him.

Of course, Covey did, and there ensued a major struggle between slaveholder and slave,

with in the end, Douglass winning.

This was a major turning point in Douglass’s life as a slave.

He wrote: “ It rekindled in my breast the smoldering embers of liberty;

It brought up my Baltimore dreams, and revived a sense of my own manhood.

I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before.

⁴ Douglass. P. 174.

I WAS A MAN NOW. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence,

and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a Freeman.”⁵

Frederick would finish his year of bondage with Covey,
and never have Covey lay a hand on him.

He was sent next to a kind slaveholder, Mr. Freeland,
but his longing for freedom, no matter how kind Mr. Freeland,
urged him to plan an escape which failed.

He was sent back to Baltimore as a final resort by Captain Auld,
who didn't know what to do with such an intelligent slave.

In 1838 he would escape to New York city,
meet with his wife to be, Anna,

and they would move to New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Douglass worked as a fugitive slave for seven more years.

Three of those self-supporting his family in New Bedford.

Next, he was asked to speak for Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist cause,
after attending one of Garrison's meetings.

At great risk to his personal safety, but he did so because
he felt his life mission was to help his brothers and sisters still in
slavery.

As a fugitive slave, his life was always threatened
with being returned to the south.

⁵ Douglas, p. 180.

The abolitionist cause sent him to Europe,
Where he spent two years travelling speaking against slavery
in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland.
After two years in Europe,
his English friends paid Master Thomas Auld \$ 700 for his freedom.

He returned to the United States and for the next eight years,
lived in Rochester, New York, where he established, with the help
of his friends on the continent, a printing press
to voice his own beliefs about abolishing slavery in America.

I have only been able to give you some glimpses of his remarkable
early years.

On February 16th, I will continue to tell his story,
especially about his influences in the Civil War,
his relationship with Lincoln,
and his never-ending voice for the care of people of color in
America.

His is the voice, through his stories and speeches,
That tells us best about the terrible transformation
from slavery to freedom in our nation.

Douglass wrote in the final lines of *My Bondage and My Freedom* in
1855,
as the crisis of slavery rose more and more in our country,

that he would never forget “his own humble origins”

nor cease “while Heaven lends me ability to use my voice, my pen or my vote,

to advocate the great and primary work of the universal and unconditional

emancipation of my entire race.” ⁶

And this he would do until his death on February 20th, 1895.

Peace and love to you.

⁶ Douglas. P 298.