

Frederick Douglass Part II

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Two Sundays ago, as part of Black History month,
I preached about Frederick Douglass' life up to around 1855.
(You can find my sermon on Frederick Douglass Part I on our UUSL website).
Now, I want to focus on some highlights of next forty years of his life.
He became a leading voice in the struggle
for African American freedom and rights in much of the 19th century.

Author Dr. David W. Blight,
who wrote his Pulitzer Prize biography of Douglas
writes of Douglass' s life – as being that of a slave
who became a lyrical prophet of freedom,
natural rights, and human equality¹.

Dr. Kellie Carter Jackson, in her book *Force and Freedom*..
provides an African American scholar's lens to help us
better understand the efforts of blacks,
freed, fugitives and slaves in the 19th century
who worked for the abolition of slavery.

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

The overarching contributions of Frederick Douglass for me
Are his efforts to end slavery,
and then to ensure rights for African Americans during Reconstruction.
He did not just rise up and challenge slavery all by himself.
There were white and black abolitionists who paved the way
for his voice and actions, as well as many who helped shape his evolving
beliefs about what would be the best path forward to ending slavery,
and to achieve equal rights for African Americans after the Civil War.
He was willing to sacrifice over and over again
for the cause of the freeing of his people and gaining for them
a life of equality with other members of American society.
He took huge risks: For example,

- speaking in public as a fugitive slave, risking being recaptured.
- During the times when he and other abolitionists were attacked,
he physically fought back. In one mob attack
he was beaten into unconsciousness with one of his hands
damaged for life.
- he rode in vehicles designated for whites only,
intentionally challenging such discrimination.

As a result, he experienced again and again,
being forcefully removed from that mode of transportation – be it
train, carriage, even transatlantic ship

– because of the color of his skin.

He was very aware that this might happen.

Sometimes his white allies tried to stop him

from being evicted, but most often, were unable to help.

- At great risk, he sheltered in his Rochester, New York home
- runaways as part of the Underground Railroad, and then helped these slave fugitives escape to Canada.

Over these years of Civil War, emancipation, and reconstruction, Douglass developed a huge network of the leading lights of the 19th century, people, whites and blacks, dedicated to ending slavery and dedicated to uplifting African Americans as human beings with the need for shelter, work, economic stability, and a voice in their nation's laws.

I am amazed by his life story, partly because of the severe traumas

Douglass experienced during the earlier parts of his life as a slave.

How did he rise above such traumatic experiences and work for so much good?

I really don't know, but I suspect that most of us would be terribly challenged to do so.

He reminds me of Victor Frankl, who survived Nazi concentration camps.

Partly I suspect that Douglass healed some of his trauma

through his connections with other people who helped him -such as William Lloyd Garrison, famous white abolitionist, who took Douglass under his wing for 20 years. Garrison placed Douglass in a major speaking role on the abolitionist circuit, thus providing him with a livelihood, by which he could support his family.

It is Garrison who wrote the introduction to Douglass' first autobiography, which sold well, and made Douglass famous.

In addition, I suspect he was helped in healing from his slave years by his traveling through Europe for the abolitionist causes.

Here he made good friends and experienced for the first time, freedom from America's prejudices towards people of color.

The years he spent in Europe gave him another way to view who he was – not as a fugitive slave, but as a human equal to all other humans.

He also had developed a deep faith in his God in his early years which sustained him, in spite of the setbacks and trials he faced in trying to free slaves, and then, during Reconstruction, in fighting for the welfare of African Americans, for their rights as human beings, for their being seen as not property, but as people, deserving equal rights of citizenship, including the right to vote.

During these last forty years of his life, he witnessed four great legislative bills that he and many other black leaders

had worked tirelessly to help bring into fruition.

The Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln on January 1, 1863 declared, during the third year of the Civil War that all slaves within the states that had seceded from the Union were freed.

Lincoln's issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation changed Douglass's view of President Lincoln for the better. He and his abolitionist friends would celebrated all night long the Emancipation Proclamation, which they previously had doubted would ever happen.

The next three pieces of legislation occurred after the Civil War, during Reconstruction: The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the US Constitution.

The Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery in the United States in 1865.

The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, gave citizenship to all people "born or naturalized in the United States, including formerly enslaved people, and provided "all people equal protection under the law, extending the Bill of Rights to the states."²

This is the amendment to our Constitution currently being challenged by our current US President.

It is clear that US law – this 14th Amendment does recognize the children of non-citizens born in the US as citizens. Period.

² Landmark Legislation. Senate.gov.

The Fifteen Amendment gave African Americans the right to vote.

Frederick Douglass also worked for women's rights.

He lent his support to the women's suffrage movement early on, and he remained steadfast in his conviction that women should be conferred civil rights equal to men.

Indeed, the day he died suddenly in 1895 of a massive heart attack, he had just returned home from a women's suffrage meeting in Washington, D.C.

Three great white men markedly influenced his life.

The first was William Lloyd Garrison, who in the 1830s and 1840s, led the abolitionist movement in America.

He was a leading proponent of nonviolent ideology and nonpolitical action.

Any efforts at resistance were shunned,

even when the abolitionist speakers, including Douglass,

were attacked by angry mobs

and brutality beaten by pro-slavery believers.

Douglass was extremely grateful to Garrison for providing him

with an orator's role in his movement for twenty years.

But he became disillusioned with a non-violent and non-political approach to ending slavery.

Dr. Kelly writes that within the Garrison fold,

“Black Americans were merely renters.
They never fully owned non-resistance principles...
When white anti-abolitionist mobs attacked,
the result was that predominantly black businesses,
black homes, and churches that were destroyed.³”

The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 changed the approach of black abolitionists.

As Dr. Kelly writes, “it was not difficult to abandon (Garrison’s)
moral suasion in the face of a slave catcher.” ⁴

Douglass had been struggling with his beliefs about moral suasion
and non-political resistance. He came to believe
that non-resistance and political action
were necessary in the fight to end slavery.

He also felt greatly disturbed by the efforts of white abolitionists
Confining him to speak only about his experiences as a slave,
not allowing him to speak his own truths about how to abolish slavery.
It was the constant threat of mob attacks and an actual mob attack
in Pendleton, Indiana that persuaded Douglass
to engage in physical altercations,
thus, ending his belief in pacificism and non-violence.

³ Kellie Carter Jackson. *Force and Freedom*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019, p.7.

⁴ Jackson, p. 7.

The second white leader who deeply influenced Douglass and other Black leaders was John Brown.

Douglass met John Brown in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1847.

Douglass at the time was discouraged about any peaceful resolution of slavery.

From this initial meeting Brown planted in Douglass' mind thoughts of some uses of violence as the only way to end slavery.

Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry in 1859 was a turning point in centering radical black thought, including Douglass' , on the use of forceful means to end slavery.

Brown advocated not only the ending of slavery but equality for all.

Dr. Kelly writes that in the African American memory, it was not just Brown's raid but his lifelong commitment to equality and taking risks by any means necessary that, in turn cultivated African American admiration. ⁵

Over some years, Douglass had become a friend to John Brown.

He was implored, indeed begged, by John Brown to join him at Harper's Ferry, but Douglass knew that John's plan was wild and not safe, and he refused to participate. He tried to dissuade John, but to no avail. However, because of his connects to John Brown, Douglass had to flee the US and return to Europe for six months until he could safely return. It is important to know that when the famous 54th Massachusetts Infantry

⁵ Kelly, p. 110.

consisting of over 1000 black soldiers and 37 white officers, fought valiantly in May of 1863, they sang the song of John Brown, including the line “His truth goes marching on,” as they marched into battle.”

The third white man to greatly influence Douglass was President Lincoln, with whom initially Douglas was in conflict. Douglass’ agenda was to end slavery. Lincoln’s was to save the union. The Emancipation Proclamation shifted for the better Douglass’ mind about President Lincoln.

Douglass and other black abolitionists were able to persuade President Lincoln that there could be no union of the country without the abolishment of slavery for all of America.

Douglass wrote touching passages in his last autobiography of how Lincoln accepted his advice and asked him for help in recruiting blacks to be soldiers in the Civil War.

Douglass’ sons Lewis and Charles were among the first to be recruited, and they fought with the Massachusetts 54th Infantry.

After the Civil War, Douglass spoke his own truths on April 1876 in a ceremony

Dedicating a statue in Lincoln park, in Washington, D.C.

in honor of President Lincoln and the freeing of the slaves⁶.
For white Americans, this statue was a tribute to Lincoln.
For President Grant and all the white politicians present,
this statue was to be dedicated mainly to President Lincoln.
But for Douglass, this statue expressed that freedom was won,
not only by President Lincoln's actions,
but by the long and hard efforts of the nation's activists and soldiers,
across time.
In his words that day Douglass honored all blacks and whites
who worked tirelessly for the nation
which finally came to the conclusion to free the slaves.

Many questions continue to arise in my mind from the life of Frederick Douglass.

One that continues to linger is the issue of non-violence and moral suasion versus the power of political action versus the decision to move into more violent ways to solve a difficult social issue, such as slavery.

A little less than a month ago,

I helped create the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Celebration here in Laconia. A successful event.

So, Dr. King was very much in my thinking as I read Frederick Douglass' words and books about him.

I wonder to this day what would have Dr. King done if he had been a slave,

⁶ The Freedman's Memorial (Emancipation Monument)

as was Frederick Douglass? Would he have continued to advocate for peaceful means?

What were the differences between these two great figures in US history?

Just different historical contexts? Perhaps, but I'm not persuaded.

Dr. King, as we know, remained a pacifist all his life.

Douglass moved from being a pacifist and championing moral and legal arguments, to later asserting the potential necessity of violence when all other efforts failed.

He supported acts of resistance by enslaved people.

King, on the other hand, believed that "hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." King emphasized reconciliation and the creation of beloved community, where justice and equality can thrive.

King argued that non-violence was not passive, but a form of active resistance that required immense courage and discipline.

In contrast, Douglass believed that the use of force was justified against tyranny.

Both men believed in the necessity of struggle for there to be progress.

Both had a shared commitment to justice and equality.

Douglass came to believe in self-defense and one's natural right to resist oppression.

The question that arises for me today is how are we

today to deal with the very real threats to our democracy?

How are we to uphold the rule of law?

How are we to assure that human rights are a given

In America today?

What methods will we best employ to guarantee that our Constitution

remains intact, its Amendments secure, so that,

as President Lincoln so famously said,

“Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the Earth.”

Peace and Love to you.

