

“Our Ancestors: Do They Define Us?”
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Usually, I plan my sermon topics pretty far in advance, and I like to keep the topics on the general side. The reason I do this is that once I start my sermon preparation, I almost always end up with a different focus than the one I had imagined. Last August, Gene and I went to Germany, and I did some genealogical research on one of my ancestors, Ferdinand Luchesi. I learned that he had led a revolutionary group protesting the autocratic rule of the state of Bavaria. This was in the 1840s. He and others wanted the state to adopt a more democratic system which would include a parliament elected by the people.

As you might imagine, this proposal was not a very popular idea with the king of Bavaria and his advisors. We found a document which listed Ferdinand’s name along with several hundred other men who had been ruled “traitors” and who were condemned to death. Fortunately, my 3rd great-grandfather was able to escape Germany on a ship headed for New York, disguised as a sailor.

So last fall, I wanted to explore in a sermon more about ancestry and in what ways our ancestors and their experiences might influence who we are today. I felt proud to have an ancestor who was on the “right” side of justice.

Well, that was then. Since that time, I’ve been focusing on another branch of my family. These ancestors, the Gibsons and the Reynolds, lived in the 19th century in the south, mainly in Mississippi. They were slaveholders. Ooh. Ancestors on the “wrong” side of justice. What do I do with that? And not only did several of my ancestors enslave African men, women and children, but I have reason to believe that in at least one case, an ancestor fathered a mixed-race child. I may have African American cousins.

For the past several years, I’ve been a part of an organization called Coming to the Table. Coming to the Table provides leadership, resources and a supportive environment for those who wish to acknowledge and heal wounds from the racism that is rooted in the United States’ history of slavery.

I was part of a national gathering last weekend in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Eighty people, most of them descendants of enslaved people and enslavers, gathered together for a weekend of sharing and learning together. The conversations and the stories were deep, honest and, I have to say, remarkable. Remarkable in that, well, I'm pretty sure these kinds of conversations and sharing are not happening anywhere else.

The legacy of slavery in the US is one of the dominant forces that shapes our society, and it needs to be talked about. So I've shifted the focus of what I want to say today to "our collective ancestry as Americans."

I recognize that some of us here this morning may have a short history of living in this country. We may have been born outside the US or our parents or our grandparents were born elsewhere and they were never involved directly with slavery. Some of us have a longer history of family living in the US, but have no ancestors who enslaved people. I can almost guarantee that there are some of us in this room besides me whose ancestors were enslavers. Some of us have ancestors who were enslaved. And to complicate matters, some of us may have ancestors who were enslaved AND ancestors who were enslavers.

Despite these differences in our individual histories, because we are all living here in this country, I have come to understand that we are all living with the legacy of slavery, in one way or another.

Katrina Browne is a filmmaker who spent years producing the PBS Emmy-nominated film, *Traces of the Trade*, the story of the DeWolf slave-trading family of Bristol, Rhode Island. She learned from her grandmother about her slave-trading ancestors. When she was in her late 20s, she read a booklet about her family history written by her grandmother. In the filming, she talks about reading the booklet. Then she hesitates and looks down. She says, "It's hard and scary to know that one is connected to evil people. There was so much family pride."

It took several "takes" before she could say on camera that she was descended from slave traders. "She then explains that the intense part was not just the shock of discovering her slave-trading ancestry, but the realization that on some level she already knew about it but had buried it." (DeWolf, *Inheriting the Trade*) She says, "I prided myself on being self-aware and self-reflective in thinking about

issues of race and society and yet I had managed to completely repress the fact that I was descended from slaveholders.”

Katrina extended an invitation to as many descendants of the DeWolf family as she could. Nine responded that they would be a part of the group to explore their common ancestry and its legacy. Others who were not able to attend were supportive of the work they were doing. Some were not.

One day early on Katrina arranges for the group to meet in Bristol with a panel of six African American people who will talk about slavery and oppression. They will share their thoughts on what they believe will be key things for them to consider on their journey. The group is shown a copy of a wanted poster for a runaway slave named York, “a very black looking fellow, frail limb’d, well fed, and speaks good English.” The notice is dated March 30, 1783 and offers a four-dollar reward for his return to his owner, Mark Antony DeWolf.

Ledlie Laughlin, one of the descendants and a retired Episcopal priest, comments, “When I saw that [poster], I was really shocked. When you read a poster like that, with your great-great-great-great-grandfather’s name on it saying, ‘I want this slave,’ ...I’ll tell you, that’s real.”

He pauses for a moment and sighs deeply. Then he says, “As an American citizen, I am responsible for our society. I share that with everybody. But I feel that somehow this family connection gives me not a special guilt, but some kind of special accountability. I’m obliged to do something, regardless of whether I’m guilty or not.”

Jo-Anne Henry, one of the members of the panel, says, “I’m so glad you said that, because that is the question. It’s being realistic about the benefit. It’s not just looking at the history and these family ancestors and what they did, which is very difficult to look at honestly to begin with. It’s asking, ‘in my life today, how does this affect me; positively or negatively?’ Race matters in this country. ‘How do I benefit from having white skin or from having this family ancestor?’”

Tom DeWolf, another member of the group and the author of Inheriting the Trade, from which I read earlier, writes, “I feel guilty, like I did something wrong, and I’m not sure why. Are ten white people about to go traipsing around the

world in order to sit around talking about slavery and feeling bad about ourselves? What's that going to accomplish?"

Deborah Howe, also a DeWolf descendant, says, "To think that somebody whose blood runs in me was manacled somebody or whipping somebody is kind of a chilling thought."

Jo-Anne Henry says that another reason she joined the panel that day is that she believes that every white-skinned person in this country benefits from the legacy of the institution of slavery. She finds that it's hardest for Americans of European descent to have honest conversations about how race affects them. Her hope is that the group of DeWolf descendants will help other white people to see the daily benefits of having white skin in this country.

As a white person, first of all I've benefited from having the option of thinking about race. I can go shopping, go to a restaurant, fill up my car with gas, go to a doctor or to the hospital and be reasonably certain that I will be treated courteously. If I get pulled over by a cop, I have the expectation that it will be for a good reason and that I'll be treated fairly. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily protection.

For most black Americans, thinking about race and racism is not optional –it's part of daily existence. Colleague and friend Rosemary Bray McNatt writes about some of her fears as a black woman. One night, her husband is late getting home. "Most married women fret about a tardy husband. Young black women like myself worry more...I fear white men in police uniforms; white teenagers driving by; panicky, middle-aged white men on the subway. Most of all, I fear that their path and my husband's will cross one night as he makes his way home.

"I fear that some white person will look at him and see only his or her nightmare – another black man in sneakers...Once upon a time I was vaguely ashamed of my paranoia about his safety in the world outside our home. After all, he's a grown man. But he's a grown black man on the streets alone. I am reminded, over and over, how dangerous white people can be, how their fears are still a hazard to our health. When white people are ruled by their fears of everything black, every black man is a rapist –even a murderer."

At the Coming to the Table conference last weekend, at some point I said, “I don’t feel guilty about having slave-holding ancestors. But I do feel that I have a responsibility. I feel a responsibility to do what I can to contribute to our healing from the legacy of slavery.” To continue my growing awareness of how I benefit from white privilege. To continue to engage in meaningful conversations with descendants of slavery, and to do my best to understand the experiences, feelings and perspectives of these individuals. I feel a responsibility to continue to grow in my understanding of our systemic and institutional racism. To continue to learn more about our country’s history and the realities of slavery.

And, finally, I feel a responsibility to share what I am learning with others, in the hope that more people will decide that they, too, need to “come to the table.” To encourage honest dialog and compassionate listening. Because, “it’s not over.” My hope is that I am able to contribute, if even in a very small way, to some healing of the legacy of slavery. Being a part of the Coming to the Table gathering feels like one of the most important things I’ve ever done. At least it’s a start.