

## SERMON on “Baltimore History in Black and White”

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One day in 1998, when I was a reporter for The Baltimore Sun, I was doing some research on slavery for an article about what seemed at the time to be a new willingness to face what you might call one of the founding crimes of the founding fathers of this country. In a folder at the Maryland Historical Society, I came across a flier from 1854 that in less than a page told a breathtaking story, one that for me captured how Baltimore in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had become an extraordinary battleground over slavery.

So here’s the story: One day in May, 1854, an 18-year-old enslaved woman name Eliza Rogers suddenly went missing from the home where she was working in East Baltimore. It was common in those days for the owners of slaves to hire them out and simply collect their wages, and Eliza Rogers had evidently worked for other families for some years.

Then suddenly she disappeared, to the distress of her own family and her employers. Her family soon discovered that she had been sold by her absentee owner – who evidently needed cash – to one of the slave traders whose businesses flourished in those days along Pratt Street, in the heart of today’s Inner Harbor. If they could not raise \$850 to buy her freedom, the trader would put Eliza Rogers aboard a ship bound to New Orleans, where she would be sold and almost certainly never see her family again.

Most of the time, in the brutal economy of slavery, that was the end of the story. But Baltimore was not only a center of the domestic slave trade – it was a lot of other things too. It had the largest free African American population in the United States – free blacks in the city outnumbered enslaved blacks 10 to 1. And it was a hotbed of abolitionism, with radical opponents of slavery walking the city’s streets with the people who lived off the buying and selling of human beings.

So in the case of Eliza Rogers, a local abolitionist heard about the case and wrote up a flier entitled “An Appeal to the Benevolent,” which is the only reason we know anything about it. The abolitionist, a guy named Sheridan Guiteau, filled in more details of the story: Eliza Rogers’ mother, whom he described in the language of the day as “a most excellent and intelligence colored woman,” had just four years earlier lost another daughter who had been “sold South,” as they said in those days, “of whom she has never since heard, and is not to this day informed in what direction she was sent, or whether she is living or dead.” Now the mother faced the prospect of losing a second daughter the same way.

Eliza Rogers’ stepfather – a free black man – had offered to indenture himself to raise the money to pay off the slave trader. But it would take months or years to raise the \$850, and there were not months to spare. Slave traders operated what they called “slave pens” or “slave jails” in the area around the harbor, and when they had enough slaves for a shipload, they would dispatch a ship to New Orleans, where the captive passengers would be auctioned off and often separated forever from their loved ones.

So this Sheridan Guiteau got an endorsement from the pastor of Baltimore’s Second Presbyterian Church, the Rev. Joseph Smith, who added to the flier that Eliza Rogers had “lived in my family and sustains an excellent character.” And Guiteau printed up 1,000 copies of the flier, appealing for donations to buy Eliza’s freedom. “Let mothers and daughters imagine the case their own,” he wrote, “and they cannot but act with promptness.”

What a drama! Think of it! This poor young woman, barely an adult at 18, who faced being torn from everything and everyone she had ever known, an urban teenager accustomed to house work who would face a life of hard labor in the cotton fields of the deep South. Her mother, who faced losing a second child. Her free stepfather, offering to re-enslave himself to buy his stepdaughter’s freedom. The abolitionist activist stepping in to try to save the day – and undoubtedly to publicize the vicious nature of the slave trade and advance his political cause. The anonymous owner of Eliza Rogers, who may well have barely known her as a human being, who evidently saw her as a mere piece of property to be sold when convenient. The slave trader, for whom the sale of Eliza Rogers was just business – just a fellow making a legal living, completely in keeping with the laws of

Maryland, a deeply divided slave state but one where the pro-slavery faction, the plantation owners, still held power.

I have not been able to find out how this story ended. Someday I'll make another dive into the archives to find out. But take Eliza Rogers' drama, and multiply it times 30,000 – one estimate of the number of people sold South from Baltimore's slave markets, as the demand for labor contracted in the tobacco-growing mid-Atlantic states and the cotton gin spurred a huge demand for field hands in the deep South. Then take her story and multiply it times one million. Between 1790 and 1859, according to one scholar's estimate, more than 1 million slaves were sold in the domestic slave trade, most of them from Maryland and Virginia.

This part of American history, when it is studied at all, has been treated as “Black History” – segregated off to the side, with its own month, evidently separate and not quite equal to “White History.” Certainly the invention of Black History Month was a huge improvement on decades of ignoring the history of African Americans in this country altogether. But to treat the story of Eliza Rogers and Baltimore's slave trade as “black history” seems absurd. The people enslaved in this country for more than 200 years did not own themselves, did not buy and sell themselves, did not write a Constitution or pass innumerable laws to make slavery not just legal but a core feature of the American economy and social life.

Nor, on the other hand, was the political movement to abolish slavery by any means an all-black movement, despite the central role of African-Americans like the great Frederick Douglass. White people are obviously woven through this history, too, some as villains, some as heroes. Can black history and white history ever be really separated in this country? I think not.

Race is a strange invention, which genetic scientists today can tell you has little basis in biology. We don't have time to plumb that story, but let me mention one fact that always sticks with me as an example of the foundation of ignorance and superstition on which racism was built. Ever wonder why white people are also called, by people trying to sound scientific or extra-polite, Caucasians? Why, when the Caucasus is a mountain range and region at the southern border of Russia?

Here's the reason: a German pioneer of anthropology named Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who died in 1840, collected human skulls. He was struck by the

beauty of a skull of a woman from what is now the republic of Georgia in the Caucasus. So on that dubious basis, he named a racial category for Europeans and other so-called “white” people and called it “Caucasian.”

Now I looked all this up after living in Russia years ago. Because people from the Caucasus are actually usually darker-skinned than ethnic Russians, Russian racists have long called Caucasians “blacks.” So think about it: Caucasians are whites in this country and blacks in Russia. It makes about as much sense as most racial thinking.

Tomorrow we celebrate the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who in his short life did so much to combat the legacy of slavery, which was still so powerful in the 1960s and which lingers still today. Today, there are more black prisoners in American jails and prisons than white prisoners, and yet there is not a single African American in the U.S. Senate. The average white household now has 20 times the wealth of the average black household. Dr. King’s achievement was to force Americans to look squarely at facts like this, their own history and the injustice and inequity it had produced. So I hope it’s appropriate today, in his honor and in his tradition, to linger on this dark chapter of Baltimore history, which is surprisingly little known even to people who have lived here all their lives.

Over the holidays, Francie and I were lucky enough to travel to Russia to see old friends and to Germany, where our son, Nathan is studying music. On the trip, we talked a lot about how different countries face, or don’t face, their history. When we lived in Russia, from 1988 to 1991, there was an outpouring of truth-telling about the crimes of Stalin, for example. But Vladimir Putin, a career KGB man himself, put the brakes on that process and has largely celebrated the history of the KGB. He has also, not coincidentally, restored authoritarian rule. Hence we see that how a government deals with history, especially the dark side of history, is very relevant to how that government operates in the present day.

In Germany, we visited the Stasi Museum in Leipzig, which is located in the old regional headquarters of the Stasi, the secret police. It’s a very honest exhibit that does not sugarcoat how the secret police operated in East Germany before 1989. In Berlin, we went to the holocaust memorial, which notably is officially entitled,

“Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe.” The name deliberately avoids euphemism. The Germans have done an admirable job of facing up to the horrific crimes of the Nazis and their moral implications.

I would give the United States a much lower grade. Who knows what the FBI headquarters in downtown Washington is called? To this day, it’s the J. Edgar Hoover Building. Hoover was the guy who, out of racism and paranoia about communist infiltration, directed his law enforcement agency to break numerous laws by targeting Martin Luther King with illegal eavesdropping and then having agents write him with threats to expose his sexual indiscretions, all with the explicit goal of driving Dr. King to suicide. That scheme was unfortunately typical for Hoover, who I suspect would have felt quite at home inside the East German or Soviet secret police. So why is his name still on the FBI’s headquarters?

When I started learning about Baltimore’s slave trade in the 1990s, there was no public recognition of this period of the city’s history. Since then, the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History and Culture opened in 2005, and it has some displays on the local slave trade. Just a couple of years ago, the state finally put up a historical marker describing the trade, right outside the museum on Pratt Street. Personally I would love to see the marker moved a little farther west, to the center of the tourist zone, where it would be harder to overlook. In fact, you could put up a whole lot more historical markers to commemorate the trade and its victims. One might note the Baltimore shipbuilders who served the illegal international slave trade – since the import of Africans as slaves had been banned in 1808 – by supplying “Baltimore clippers,” the speedy craft the slavers used to evade the Coast Guard.

It would take more than one historical marker to tell the story of Frederick Douglass, born into slavery on the Eastern Shore and first sent to Baltimore at the age of eight. Here he learned to read and learned of the abolition movement. “Going to live at Baltimore,” he later wrote, “laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity.” But he also witnessed the slave trade. The traders usually marched slaves from their slave jails or slave pens along Pratt Street to Fells Point, where they would be rowed out to the ships bound for New Orleans. They would be moved in what were called “coffles,” groups of men, women and children all chained together, late at night to try to avoid trouble, but

often with wailing, grieving family members trailing behind. Frederick Douglass later wrote in one of his terrific autobiographies about waking in the middle of the night in the Fells Point house where he lived in the 1820s and hearing the terrible sounds of the coffles.

“I lived on Philpot Street, Fells Point, and have watched from the wharves, the slave ships in the basin,” Douglass wrote, “. . .with their cargoes of human flesh, waiting for favorable winds to waft them down the Chesapeake. In the deep still darkness of midnight, I have often been aroused by the dead heavy footsteps, and the piteous cries of the chained gangs that passed our doors.”

A Baltimore slave trader named Hope Slatter later came up with a solution to complaints about the grim processions of slaves being sold South: he hired new-fangled horse-drawn “omnibuses” to move his slaves to the Fells Point docks. The Baltimore Sun in the 1830s was full of Slatter’s advertisements, headed “Cash for Negroes” and declaring: “Cash and the highest prices will at all times be given for likely slaves of both sexes. . . . Persons having such property to dispose of, would do well to see me before they sell, as I am always purchasing for the New Orleans market.” In 1838 he bragged of the opening of a slave jail at Pratt and Howard streets, quote “not surpassed by any establishment of the kind in the United States.” What a thing to brag about!

Ads in the Sun and posters seeking the return of runaway slaves were ubiquitous. It’s hard today to learn much about enslaved individuals, except for the few who, like Frederick Douglass, escaped and became famous. But sometimes the runaway notices inadvertently give a glimpse of the human beings involved. Listen to this 1809 poster, from Westminster, Md., offering \$10 for the return of a runaway: “Peter, about 30 years of age speaks German nearly as well as English; he was brought up by me to do plantation work chiefly, of which he is very capable; but can do a little at blacksmith, shoe-making and carpenter’s work, and has some knowledge of making gun barrels. He also plays on the fiddle and fife tolerably well.” My daughter Martha, when I read this notice to her, said, “It sounds like a personal ad.” It’s a reminder of the human talent blighted or limited by slavery.

But Baltimore, as I said, also became a center for abolitionists as well. One was Benjamin Lundy, a Quaker like many abolitionists, who ran a journal with a

wonderful name: the Genius of Universal Emancipation. In 1826, after a particularly egregious episode, Lundy wrote in his journal about Baltimore's leading slave trader, Austin Woolfolk, calling him quote "a monster in human shape." Woolfolk did not take this well. Meeting Lundy on the street one day, he choked the abolitionist and savagely beat and kicked him. Lundy took Woolfolk to court, but the judge -- pro-slavery in his sympathies -- took note of the provoking nature of the name-calling and fined the slave trader only \$1.

Indeed, the distorted ideology of the slave owner suffused Maryland in those days. In 1857, a free black man in Dorchester County got 10 years in prison for mere possession of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," since Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel was considered a dangerously provocative book. An 1859 meeting of slaveholders at the Towson courthouse passed a resolution declaring, quote, "That the welfare of the Negro and his elevation in the scale of existence is dependent upon his continuation of subordination under a superior and more intellectual race."

This was in Towson, Maryland, fellow members of the Towson Unitarian Universalist Church. This is our history, folks.

Above the entrance to the museum at the holocaust memorial in Berlin is a very simple quote from Primo Levi, the Italian writer who survived Auschwitz:

"It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say."

To repeat: "It happened, therefore it can happen again: this is the core of what we have to say."

The next time you take your guests to the harbor, showing off our quirky, wonderful city, think about the slave pens that thrived there in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Remember young Fred Douglass, awakened by the slave coffles in the middle of the night, and the Quaker Benjamin Lundy, beaten for combating slavery, and Eliza Rogers, who was lost, or let's hope, was not lost to her family through the brutal machinations of the slavery industry. And let us rededicate ourselves to the work of justice and reconciliation, and remember what Frederick Douglass said in 1865: that "a nation is not born in a day," and listen to what Martin Luther King said a century later in 1967: "When our days become dreary

with low-hovering clouds of despair, and when our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a creative force in this universe, working to pull down the gigantic mountains of evil, a power that is able to make a way out of no way and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

Now for a hymn, hymn number 211, “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder.”