

Is There No Balm in Gilead?

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

Amos 8:4-8

Center Church, Hartford

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Jeremiah 8

Plymouth, Massachusetts. What happened there and when? (Get answers). Indeed, 102 passengers and around 30 crew crossed the north Atlantic in that small ship in 1620. One died. Two women went through childbirth. It was not an easy passage.

Point Comfort, Virginia. What happened there and when? (Get answers). It was a larger ship, the White Lion. The Africans on board were survivors of 350 captured in Angola and sailed to Veracruz, Mexico. By the time they landed there, half of the Africans had died. Somewhere between 20 and 30 of the survivors were placed on the White Lion and sailed to Point Comfort to be enslaved by the colonists in Jamestown. Chained in the hold of two different ships, to say it was not an easy passage is an extreme understatement.

A year before the Pilgrims, came enslaved Africans.

The fact that every school child in this country learns the first story, but the majority of them still do not learn the second tells you everything you need to know about how we have created the mythology of the United States. We want to be known as a "Christian" nation, or so say many in and out of public office. So, those devout Pilgrims work to define us. Not so much the fact that a year **before** the Pilgrims arrived, the "Christians" in Jamestown bought human beings and forced them to work, beating them or killing them when they did not do so to their satisfaction. Which began 250 years of slavery and another 150 of systemic racism in this country. This is not only a societal issue or a political issue, this is a religious issue. If we remember the Pilgrims as our ancestors in faith, we need to also acknowledge the folk in Jamestown were, too.

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And, ultimately, the arrival in Point Comfort, Virginia had much more of an impact on this nation and the people in it and the churches in it than did those Pilgrims.

We have Thanksgiving feasting to remember Plymouth. With what shall we remember Point Comfort?

Lament. Lament. Lament.

“For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people.” (Jeremiah 8:21-9:1)

The very least we owe those ancestors is our mourning and tears. Let us be in silence together and grieve.

Amos 8:4-8

Have you all been to the Harriet Beecher Stowe House on Farmington Ave.? Right after you walk in, you see this quote on the wall from her writing, in which she explains why she wrote the book *Uncle Tom's Cabin* : “I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother, I was oppressed and brokenhearted with the sorrows and injustice I saw [referring to slavery], because as a Christian I felt the dishonor to Christianity—because as a lover of my country, I trembled at the coming day of wrath.” Echoing, perhaps, the prophet Amos: “Shall not the land tremble on this account?”

In roughly the same era as Stowe, the once-enslaved Frederick Douglass said it a bit more graphically: “I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of the land... I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master. The slave prison and the church stand near each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time.

The dealers in the bodies of men stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise.”

— Frederick Douglass, [Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass](#)

None of us here of any race were born when there were slaves, and yet we have all either benefited or suffered because once in this land, in this very city, Africans and African-Americans were bought and sold. Insurance companies here made a lot of money by insuring human beings as property, and some of that money undoubtedly found its way to our offering plates. Our political and economic systems were built on this forced labor.

In the North, we often like to say that this was a Southern thing, as though no slaves were here and no one benefitted from slavery here. As you well know, that's not true. Clergy in this church held slaves. Yes, Christianity produced abolitionists and supported the anti-slavery movement, or at least a minority of American Christians did. Christian churches also supplied Biblical verses to support slavery and sometimes claimed that buying slaves was good because they would be made Christian. We, as Christians, are complicit.

“The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deed. Shall not the land tremble on this account?” (Amos 8:7-8)

The challenge I want to leave us today is this: what would it look like for The First Church of Christ in Hartford to make reparations for slavery?

One Christian writer says this: “The idea of reparations is one of the hardest to face in the journey toward healing because it requires us to understand who the god of America is: not the God of ancient Israel or the God of Jesus, but rather the god of materialism. To talk about reparations is to run squarely into the false idol of our culture: the power of money.

Reparations literally means doing repair work. The idea is a biblical one. The community of Israel recognized the need to have a periodic time of repairing the social fabric. One form of reparations was the Jubilee Year (Lev. 25:1–10), when prisoners were freed and debts forgiven. Another was the order to compensate Hebrew slaves when they were released (Deut. 15:12–18)—they were not to be sent away “empty handed.” The people of Israel recognized that reparations is a spiritual issue.

The impact of race and slavery is so deep that no adequate reparation can ever be made. Yet if we want to find some semblance of healing, we must wade into this topic.” (Nibs Stroupe, Christian Century, September 10, 2019)

Wade in the waters, children. God's gonna trouble the waters. Please, let's continue this conversation. Amen.