

**“The Underground Railroad, Then and Now”**  
**Marching Shoes**  
**Martin Luther King, Jr. Celebration**  
**Larry Reimer**  
**The United Church of Gainesville,**  
**January 17, 2010**

**Psalm 137: 1-3 “By the rivers of Babylon...”**

**Revelation 21: 1-4 “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...”**

In December I picked up the Pulitzer Prize winning book The Hemingses of Monticello by Annette Gordon-Reed. It’s about Sally Hemings, a slave of Thomas Jefferson, with whom he had a twenty year long relationship and five children.

It’s a very heavy book. First of all it’s physically heavy. Sandy and I tend to do most of our reading in bed as we fall asleep. This book is so heavy that it makes a dent in my stomach.

It’s also profoundly heavy in its subject matter for it uncovers elements of the lives of slaves I never considered or never knew. This book reminds me that we cannot go forward in our continued quest for Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream without pausing to remember the nightmare that was slavery.

The blight of slavery remains America’s original sin, one part of what polluted the Garden of Eden that was this land. Annette Gordon-Reed reminds me of the ways we are still harvesting the seeds of evil that we planted in slavery. We cannot become who God calls us to be without acknowledging again slavery’s role in our creation as a nation.

Here are four things Gordon-Reed’s book called me to remember about slavery as a background to talking about the Underground Railroad both then and now.

First, as Lerone Bennett’s epoch work Before the Mayflower reminds us, Africa lost an estimated 40 million people during the 400 years of the slave trade. Half came to the US as slaves. The other half died. The ramifications of that destruction of the culture of the people of an entire continent continue today in both Africa and America.

Second Annette Gordon-Reed points out that when slaves were deposited in America, they were sold off regardless of the family, tribe, or nation they came from, this from an African continent more diverse than Europe. This meant that African slaves found themselves on plantations with others who were not necessarily of their own family, culture, or language. This was not like my Mennonite European ancestors who not only willingly came to this country to escape persecution, but also settled in family and ethnic communities where they kept their own language, religion and history alive for generations.

Third, the white American colonists reversed the legal precedent of their native English law which said, you were known by who and what your father was, and you had the rights your father had. Virginians and other colonists, however,

decided to adopt the old Roman rule for their slaves, *partus sequitur ventrum*, which says you are who and what your mother was. Why did the colonist depart from English tradition? It was because female slaves, who had no protection from the sexual whims of their white overseers, had many interracial children.

If the colonists followed English law whereby slave children of white fathers inherited the rights of their fathers, then all manner of slave children would have been free. Colonists needed a way to prevent passing of liberty from white fathers to their bi-racial slave children. They also needed their bi-racial children to remain their property. Thus it was decreed that the children of slaves had no legal connection to their fathers, white or black. White men had no legal responsibility for their slave offspring, and Black men had no legal rights to their offspring. Stop and consider the consequences of destroying the rights and responsibilities of the fathers, both black and white, for African families in America from the beginning of slavery and consider how those consequences echo on today.

Fourth, The Hemingses of Monticello points out an interesting seldom mentioned motive for the American Revolution. The American colonies were afraid that England would abolish slavery, which had never been legalized in England. At the time of the American Revolution, British Abolitionists under the leadership of William Wilberforce were already working to abolish the slave trade. He succeeded in 1807. It was more than taxation without representation that shoved us into revolution. It was also a fear of losing slaves.

As with any dominant evil that rages through eras and nations, there is always a countervailing force of good. One such force was the Underground Railroad that developed in this country to provide a route for slaves to find their way to freedom.

The Underground Railroad of course was not a subway of real trains. Instead it was a hidden means for slaves to find their way North, especially to Canada. Quakers and Congregationalists, our predecessor denomination, were very active in establishing a network of safe houses where slaves could hide on their way to freedom. However, most of the Underground Railroad was organized and facilitated by former slaves themselves. It's estimated that over 100,000 slaves escaped through the Underground Railroad by 1850. Through an intricate series of messages and codes, slaves found their way from one safe house to another.

Harriet Tubman, whose story Mary Nutter shared with the children, was known as the "The Moses of her people" as she led hundreds of slaves to freedom. Like most of the conductors of the Underground Railroad, Ms. Tubman was born in a border state, in this case, Maryland. As a teenager, she was critically wounded by an overseer who threw a heavy iron weight at a young man who had gone to the store without permission. The iron mistakenly hit young Harriet in the head, nearly crushed her skull and left her unconscious for days. She was scarred and suffered seizures the rest of her life.

As a young adult, she feared that she was going to be sold, so she ran away, following the North Star to guide her to freedom. She made it to Philadelphia

where she worked as a household servant to earn money to return to help others escape.

I share these historical accounts, because history shows us two things. One is how people are blinded to evil right before them, and two is how courageous people find their vision, recognize evil, and fight against it. In order to name evil and identify how to fight it today, let's look at the equivalent of the Underground Railroad today?

Tracy Kidder, in his book, Strength in What Remains tells the story of a young man improbably named Deogratias (which means "thanks be to God") from the East Central African nation of Burundi, bordered by Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Deo, against all odds, got an education and was accepted at Burundi's only medical school in the early 1990's. Within a year a genocidal civil war broke out. One night a marauding militia attacked the hospital where Deo was working. By hiding under a bed, he escaped the slaughter that killed virtually everyone else in the hospital. He fled to the jungle and made his way to neighboring Rwanda. He hid in refugee camps in Rwanda, afraid for his life until the violence subsided enough for him to return to Burundi.

When he crossed the border to Burundi, military authorities tagged him as enemy and took him aside to kill him. A woman from Burundi, a stranger to Deo, whose own son had been killed in the fighting literally took Deo by the hand and told the military authorities that Deo was her son. This woman was a Hutu, the tribe that was killing all the Tutsi's of which Deo was a member. Even when the military tried again to take Deo to be killed, she whisked him to safety. That was his first experience with a modern Underground Railroad.

In Burundi, a friend of Deo whose family still had some political connections asked the Burundi consulate to give Deo a visa to go to America as a coffee marketer. They tutored him in the coffee trade, bought him a plane ticket, and gave him \$200 to start a new life. This was another safe house on a modern Underground Railroad.

Arriving in New York speaking only French, he found work delivering groceries for \$15 a day and slept in Central Park. One day he found his way to St. Thomas More Church where a former Catholic Sister became his advocate. She spent months searching for a place for Deo to live. An older couple with no children, she an artist and he a retired sociology professor, took Deo in to their small flat. They stuck with him until he eventually was accepted at Columbia University, and after that to Dartmouth Medical School. Caring people provided another safe house in an Underground Railroad of today.

Here's one more contemporary Underground Railroad story. E. Benjamin Skinner, writing in Time magazine, defines modern slavery as any system where people are forced to perform services for no pay beyond subsistence. Skinner says that by this definition there are more slaves today in the world than in any point in human history. Skinner tells the story of Andre Lombard, a 39 year old Christian Pastor in South Africa, who with his organization works day and night

to free teenage girls from the sex trade within blocks of The Nelson Mandela Soccer stadium where the world Cup soccer championship will be held this June. Skinner points out the U.S. spends more in one day combating drug trafficking than it does in a year combating sex trafficking. Andre Lombard provides another kind of Underground Railroad.

When I was old enough to claim my own faith and look back at the injustices of race and poverty that I never noticed in my own comfortable suburban upbringing, I vowed to put on my marching shoes to stand up to injustice whenever and wherever I saw it. I prayed for vision where I had been blind to evil and courage to act where I had been complacent.

My greatest failures have been in trying to take on personal rescues. What I have discovered is that it is better to work through trustworthy organizations.

This church is for me at times something of an Underground Railroad. In 1979, just after the Vietnam War there was a tremendous exodus of displaced souls from Southeast Asia known as "boat people." We in this church sponsored a family from Laos, and gave them a start in this country.

In the 1982 churches and synagogues across the U.S. formed the Sanctuary Movement to defy U.S. immigration law by establishing an "Underground Railroad" from Arizona to Chicago for Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees. Since the US sponsored the Salvadoran government's death squads, our country would not grant political asylum to those fleeing their terror. The Gainesville Quakers and we at UCG sponsored a Salvadoran family, perhaps illegally, giving them sanctuary. One day, the father in this family told his horrible tale, of hiding with other refugees in a garage when government troops opened fire. He survived and escaped only because he was buried under the bodies of the dead.

Another example of how UCG is now acting as an Underground Railroad is through the Interfaith Hospitality Network, providing shelter for homeless. Signing up for IHN today is providing a safe house to a soul seeking shelter.

There are countless ways to put on our marching shoes to be part of today's many Underground Railroads. Not all are dramatic or political. Engaging today's Underground Railroad can be as simple as offering shelter and respite to a loved one in pain. Any act that provides a pathway to physical or emotional freedom to someone trapped in a situation they cannot escape is a kind of Underground Railroad. It may be ordinary. It may be dramatic. It is always a march for justice.

The psalmist shares the lament of the Israelites forced into exile and living as slaves. Their captors ask them to sing those happy songs of home. The psalmist replies, how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

At a later date the writer of the book of Revelation shares a vision of the heavenly Jerusalem where God wipes away all tears and mourning; crying and pain will be no more. Those visions kept exiled Israelites, early Christians, African slaves, and Salvadoran refugees living their hopes in the confidence that folks like us on the other side would break the bonds of injustice and open the gates of our hearts, homes, lives and cities to them.

In his letter from the Birmingham City Jail, Dr. Martin Luther King challenged the white churches to put on our marching shoes. He said that time alone won't cure the evils of injustice. We must put on our marching shoes, as Dr. King said because "human progress never rolls on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of those willing to be co-workers with God... We must realize that the time is always ripe to do right."

(Letter from the Birmingham City Jail, April 1963)

Prayer –

Plunge the depth of our hearts O God, and call us. Call us out of complacency. Call us out of blindness to the evils before us. Call us to be the leaven in the loaf of society, the yeast in the bread of life that causes us to rise and be more than flat crackers of carelessness.

Stir us to put on our marching shoes that we move this society from the status quo of things as they are to a world of dreams of what might be.

Move us, so that when people wonder, "What kind of people worship in that church?" we can say that we are people who march to the drummer of justice and peace.

Amen.