

*Introduction to Sermon* My presentation this morning is dedicated, with gratitude, to my ancestors, both cultural and biological, it amazes me that **they**, coming from so few and treated so horrendously, were still able to make **me** possible.

### **Finding a Shared Vision for America**

Beginning in January of this year, I have been on journey learning about the history of slavery in the United States of America in a course offered through the University of Pennsylvania titled, *The History of the Slave South*.

I have learned facts that I should have learned years ago, but was never taught because the subject of slavery has long been suppressed in this country. But, I do not blame my teachers in my schools in South Carolina, or New York, or most recently, La Salle here. This is something I needed to know and have just taken the time to study in my later years. Perhaps it was out of

shame, or denial, or it was just too painful, heretofore, but, not anymore. My goal now is to learn it and to accept it, without being penalized for the deficiencies caused by it. Then, to move toward a better future, making sure it's never forgotten.

Even before the first Africans were brought to the shores of Virginia in 1619, the slave trade had become the basis for most trading between Europe and the Americas. The Middle Passage of slaves from Africa to the West Indies (Caribbean) across the Atlantic became the essential part of a system of trading routes between Europe, Africa, and North America. The exchange of goods along these routes became known collectively as the triangular trade (see the map behind me). Developed primarily by sea captains from England and New England, ships in the triangular trade carried goods between Europe, Africa,

and the new world, although not necessarily in that order.

The triangular trade system was highly profitable because each region produced goods which were not produced elsewhere. England produced both textiles and manufactured goods which were not available in either North America or Africa. These products, along with rum obtained from New England would be traded in Africa for slaves and various riches such as gold and silver. Next, England would trade slaves and their domestic goods to the West Indies, where sugar and molasses were available. From there the sugar, molasses, and the remainder of the slaves, textiles, and domestic goods would be traded in America for tobacco, fish, lumber, flour, foodstuffs, or perhaps rum which had been distilled in New England.

Over the next two hundred forty plus years, African slaves endured unprecedented horror. In addition to global slavery imports and exports via the triangle, there was the intra-state buying and selling of slaves by slave traitors, particularly from the north to south. Hence, slaves were shackled and marched for great distances. And slave families were torn apart.

Here, I must stop and explain one of the slave codes:

Slaves were chattel property and owned for life. They were not considered to be human, but things and any child born to a slave woman was also a slave, regardless of who the father was, even if the father was white.

Therefore, profits extracted from the bodies and labor of the enslaved made the cotton South one of the richest and most dynamic economies in the modern world.

The power (in every sense of the term) of slaveholders rested in violence. So while it is almost impossible to convey the human experience and toll of it on people of African descent enslaved in the United States, the evidence of the violence is littered throughout historical records. I can imagine when the first slaves arrived; they were too starved and afraid to do anything, save suicide, or attempting to run. But, run where?

As time went on and the institution of slavery was firmly entrenched in this country, slaves became aware of the ways of their captors, in some cases more aware than the captors themselves. Solomon Northrup (of *Twelve Years a Slave* fame) describes his master, Mr. Epps, in perfect detail in terms of demeanor, habits, etc. So, as with all intelligent human beings, slaves figured out ways to lessen work with tasks systems, etc. They also figured

out ways to win favors and take care of their own, as much as possible.

Maya Angelou wrote, "I know Why the Caged Bird Sings" and this describes the coping mechanisms of some slaves as slavery went on and on for years. There were many ways of coping, some submissive, some violent. Of course for women, there was the double danger that is always with a woman of any color, but most of all with those who were owned. And that is the danger of rape and its consequences. Slave women learned to live with this constant threat. Family, however extended, played a most important role as well. During my class, I was very interested to learn about the fictive (or extended) family, remnants of which remain today. And the naming of children after ancestors was important to keep the family

line alive. Here is a rare picture of three generations of a slave family.

I am so intrigued to learn more about the continuation of African customs in religious practices, praise houses, art, burial rites, and other customs. I am particularly interested in those of the Gullah of low country South Carolina. My ancestors came from up country South Carolina, near the mid- western North Carolina border. But, I have seen African and Native American traditions celebrated in my grandmother's church.

I may have had no choice in coming here and no choice in what happened when I got here and no choice in how many forces mixed to make me. But, I am here now and I have a right to be here. I may not collect on that “**promissory note**”, as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King

called the "***Constitution of the United States.***" But, I plan to let **no man** put me asunder.

Our goal should be to preserve and protect:

- Our Values: What makes us unique?
- Our Beliefs: What are the non-negotiables of our heritage?
- Our Mission: What do we want, and what do we do?

Best –selling author, Rev. Wayne Muller, writes the following in *How Then, Shall We Live? - Four Simple Questions That Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of Our Lives*:

“It is vital and true and deeply required that we tell our story. We must trace the shape of it, speak of the place in our body where it still lives, weep the tears of it, allow

it to be seen and known. To know the story of how we came to be here, how we came to be this way.”

My power today lies in **remarkable gratitude**. I am not a victim. There are no lost causes. "I've been there, done that, and I know suffering -- but it's all good." I am still standing. I am somebody and I know from whence I came.” Self-pity is an excuse to do nothing. To appeal to sympathy for pity's sake is to seek affirmation of the choice to do nothing. I am empowered by my ancestors’ spirits and the meaningful support of learning about the slave experience and I am transformed with silent resilience. I will bloom where I am planted.

However, I feel it is important to look at the rest of the country and the world to put slavery in its true context, as an evil system. Slavery in America became an explosive issue in the mid-Nineteenth Century. The rest of the world had moved so far by the 1850's, while the south was hanging on to their precious way of life. Then, a second wave of Irish immigrants, escaping the potato famine, arrived in the America around that time and a whole new battle for labor and resources began.

Rita will now talk about the Irish in America.

Thank you for listening.