

The Legacy

Ezra 9:5-6

The Reverend Erica Wimber Avena

Juneteenth weekend; June 20, 2021

Prayer: Liberating God, we offer our thanksgiving and praise for your hearing the cries of the oppressed – it is your nature to take account of the disenfranchised, and to bless the faith of those whose circumstances have humbled them. We lift up our legacy. We call to mind our ancestors who longed to see this day come. We remember their struggle, we give thanks for their efforts, as they did in their day, help us now to turn our own outrage at systemic injustice into action, and our discouragement and hopelessness into resilience in our common cause...

Later this morning we will be dedicating Unity Green. A new name for a historic space. A name that isn't meant to be a final word, but a new beginning for how we give language to our common space. (Although the temporary sign will give way to a permanent sign, our hope is that Unity will become part of the cognitive furniture, if you will, supporting a vibrant, diverse community life – affirming the human dignity of all.) Of course we could not have known that the federal holiday would be named on Thursday...but sometimes it is as if all things are working together for good... sometimes you see out of the corner of your eye...is God doing a new thing...among us...?

I'd like to ask you to take a moment and find someone next to you, either to your left or to your right, look them in the eyes, look *kindly* in their eyes, and repeat after me:

- The legacy of slavery is not your fault.
- You did not begin the legacy of gun violence in our country
- The legacy of substance abuse began before you were born.
- You are a beloved child of God. I'm glad you're here. We can work together to un-do this legacy.

Friends there are big theological words for this, but let me say it without labels: The world we live in contains the mistakes of others, chains of events set in motion sometimes by accident other times on purpose, other people's problems can become crushing down the line for innocent bystanders. Today we name this as systemic injustice, institutionalized racism, disparities in access to education, health care, opportunity; you might hear the term collateral damage a euphemism for those unintentionally killed in wars. In order to understand this legacy, and the powerful opportunities today, I'd like to invite you back in time, in order to go forward mindfully, confidently, and faithfully.

I am preaching today, on another sermon. So this is a sermon on a sermon. (The Bible is full of sermons on sermons, Paul preaches on Jesus, Jesus preaches about John's sermons; John preaches on the prophets preaching; the prophets all preach on each other; and everybody preaches on Moses. I'm preaching on Nathan Perkins, and Perkins is preaching on Ezra –we're just three deep. And we'll bring Rev. Colton into it, by and by.)

This church's third Pastor, the Rev. Nathan Perkins' *Fast Sermon* was delivered and published July 23, 1812 on the eve of the declaration of war against Great Britain. "*The National Sins and*

National Punishment, in the Recently Declared War.” Called the *Fast Sermon*, it was published widely and quoted in the newspapers. The *Fast sermon* is not fast. It was 30 pages in its published form, and takes a while to digest. Not the speedy kind of fast, it’s the other one -- the religious kind of fast. The one where you refrain from celebratory meals, and only take a minimum of nutrition, in order to focus instead on matters of the spirit.

This is his portrait. Nathan Perkins was Pastor here for 66 years, one of the longest Pastorates recorded in the United States. He would have been still preaching in his late 80’s. (We don’t do this anymore, for several reasons.) He published sermons several times in the leading journal of his day *The American Preacher*.¹

I am interested in his books in the background of this portrait. Including a volume of the works of Jonathan Edwards, Edwards was a slave-holder, he was also preaching abolitionist sermons as early as 1773. Hypocrite or prophet? Perkins is influenced by Edwards, quotes him in sermons, as this portrait makes clear. Perkins also knew Lemuel Haynes; we have letters between them. Lemuel was a contemporary, bi-racial ordained minister, whom Perkins supported in a preaching tour of the area.² A tremendously unique and influential minister born in Hartford to a white mother and an enslaved African father. I’d like to give more time to Rev. Lemuel Haynes on another day. For now, you should know that Perkins had important colleagues and support.

Nathan Perkins has become increasingly alarmed by legacy problems in this community and in our country. In his words: slave holding, dueling, intemperance.³ He says: “Murder, robbery, theft, extortion – oppression, and uncleanness, as well as intemperance, are crimes, which militate directly against the peace, order, and well-being of the community.”⁴ He is asking them to pay attention to what we would call civic life or the social fabric:

- “...slave-holding...is a sin...with awful consequences... We have no more right to make slaves of others, than they have of us... (which is language common at that time, and goes on for pages) The black population of the Southern states, as may be seen in the last census, is immense. What according to the course of nature, will be the effect, eventually?”⁵ (What if the slaves revolt...and what if they do not...)
- Dueling is his second concern. When Timothy Goodman gave the land in 1749 to the Ecclesiastical Society (there was no municipal Government to trust it to) it was for a parrade (sic) route forever. Meaning, a place for military exercises, of the type that became protected -- you will be familiar with what later became our second amendment. “A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free state.”⁶ 63 years later,

¹ An annual publication of influential sermons at the time

² *Black Preacher to White America: the collected Writings of Lemuel Haynes, 1774-1833* 1990 Richard Newman pp. xxx - xxxi

³ I am collapsing Perkins’ variously stated moral concerns throughout the sermon under the umbrella of “intemperance.” His says: “Intemperance, duelling, (sic) slave-holding – and the prevalence of infidel and loose principles.” Unquestionably, these have contributed to bring upon us, heavy divine judgements. Our land is now peculiarly afflicted, and frowned upon, in holy and righteous Providence. Our state is critical and awful. It calls for lamentation, and repentance. But our help is the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth. Pp. 13-14, *Fast Sermon*

⁴ Ibid pp. 14

⁵ Ibid pp. 16-18

⁶ Second Amendment, United States Constitution

dueling is a public nuisance. If you saw the musical Hamilton you will have been reminded that Alexander Hamilton gives his son Phillip, his dueling pistols, tells him how to conduct himself honorably, and then the boy dies in the duel. 19 years old. Hamilton himself dies a few weeks later in a duel with Aaron Burr on July 12, 1804, using the same pistols. It's devastating. For them, their family, for our country. We lost Hamilton at the age of 47. Perkins says: "(Dueling) is found among those, who profess to move in polished life; to be men of honor; to have a high sense of what is proper...in every view, it is murder, atrocious murder: and has no excuse..."⁷ Perkins gives sermons to the troops out here on the Green regularly, we have several of them. It's the same men. The ones who own the pistols, they have the guns in their homes; the citizen militia. Heroes or criminals?⁸ Perkins is witness to this folly; he does their funerals; he understands the social cost.

- Perkins' sermon is a long one, I see three main points, but he doesn't stick to them consistently all the way through. He has a series of moral concerns that I would bring under the heading of intemperance, which is his word. For pages, and by pages I mean hours, he encourages his people to do what they can to avoid excess use of any substance. The consequences for some are nothing at all, the consequences for others are catastrophic. His concern is for individuals yes, but also for the common good. Families impoverished, educations aborted, health ruined is a heavy toll all around. If there is anything in your ability to reign this in, it is worth making an effort. If not for your own well-being, for the common good.

The declaration of war brings these simmering problems to a boiling point. The sheer evil unleashed by each of these threatens to eclipse the hard earned freedoms won in our young country.

We know right from wrong, yet we still collude with the wrong, all the while hoping it will somehow, magically, get set right.

He calls them to fast and pray. Using the book of Ezra which is a blue print in scripture for reconstruction and restoration. It is an account of the reversal of the Babylonian destruction and deportations in the sixth century BCE.⁹ This is how the people *came back* after having been devastated. They march back to Jerusalem, they pray, they build, and then they are called to pray; and then they build; and then they recall what has gone wrong; and then they pray again.

When Perkins calls them to prayer; he is speaking to people who are connected. The first and second Pastors of this church, Benjamin Colton and Nathanael Hooker were slaveholders. We see in Benjamin Colton's will that he leaves a slave, Chris, to his son Abijah. Perkins knew Abijah and Chris the enslaved man; everyone gathered would have known them, seen them. The congregation Perkins was addressing were themselves slaveholders, enslaved persons seated in the gallery, and free people.

What I want to lift out of this excursion into history is how fully enmeshed we may be in the systemic evils of our time; and yet how we can do our own part to lean into a way out of them.

⁷ Ibid pp. 15

⁸ In 1855 the Colt factory will open, Smith and Wessen opens in Springfield in 1856, Winchester in New Haven 1866. Nathan Perkins identifies a problem which only proliferates.

⁹ Also described in 2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 6:2-5

And I want you to understand that you cannot undo this kind of evil on your own. You shouldn't try. You'll get burned out and disillusioned if you try it at home alone.

Perkins asked his people to consider all of this in prayer and fasting. Not by themselves, but together. Fasting is a spiritual discipline intended to reinforce mindfulness, ironically by depriving the body. (Your pull to hunger is your reminder to attend to your spiritual intention.) Personally, I feel we have all had a bellyful of pandemic restrictions to rival any colonial fast. The language I might use is a call to mindfulness, creativity, out of the box thinking, compassion, a call to listen to the voice of someone who is saying something is wrong. A call to turn over what you know of injustice in the world, how you can make creative connections to improve the legacy we all leave for the coming generations. A call for compassionate reflection and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Whose truth needs to be amplified? What other voices need to be brought forward?

Church historians are quick to point out that slaves and women were full members of the church centuries before it happened in civic life. Churches have incubated a kind of double consciousness among their members. It is not easy to say you are against slavery, to believe in its abolition, and then spend all day every day doing business with slaveholders, eating with them, living near them, sitting next to them in school and in church. Are we hypocrites or prophets, to know such people? Good neighbors or treacherous?

We live with the same ambiguities, and the same opportunity for change. Legacy problems inherited from the past arrive in every generation. And those people on either side of you this morning are your allies. We did not create these problems, they are not entirely in our personal control, but many of us can touch parts of this problem, and we can work together. With faith.

Adrienne Billings-Smith pointed out that there are people in this community who are stricken to know that the name of a slaveholder is reflected in our public space. And I have heard her say that she is not asking us to move mountains. But if everyone could pick up and move one rock... the mountain of injustice will change shape entirely...

In the pandemic of 2020-2021 we have fasted from all manner of personal comforts for the sake of the health of others. Without necessarily knowing it, we have been prepared for this day by the past 15 months.

When you stop by the center in the future with a young person, it will say Unity Green. Maybe the label will be enough. Or maybe you might need to tell a story about someone from the past, about how people came together to create safe space for one another. People you loved; people who changed you, their faith in the most difficult days. All working together. A good example creates opportunity; each generation leaves a legacy. Today by God's grace, we begin a new chapter. Together.

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