

“The Amistad Event”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages
March 3rd, 2013
3rd Sun. in Lent

1Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

[The Apostle Paul wrote,]

*‘Friends, I want to remind you that all of our ancestors
walked under the cloud and went through the sea.
This was like being baptized...*

1 Cor. 10:1-2a

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to acknowledge real differences while looking beyond them
to see that we are all in the same boat.

Amen

Early in the summer of 1973 – just a month before I was to report
to West Point for New Cadet Training, also called “Beast Barracks”,

I went with my family on a camping trip
to Cape Henlopen State Park near Lewes, DE.

We had to take the ferryboat from Cape May, NJ – which is a reasonably long trip,
long enough to have to get out of the car and walk around.

It so happened, there were a number of sailors on that vessel as passengers,
wearing dress whites with the dixie cup hats.

I got to talking with them and learned they were Coastguardsmen –
fresh out of boot-camp;

They were filled with stories and I was anxious to hear them...

One young man told me how tough the training had been
and that he had gone AWOL – Absent Without Leave.

But he was caught and lamented about how he was punished –
by being forced to sleep with his rifle.

I talked with another young Coastguardsman and asked if the training had been
tough on him, too; He said that it had and I could see he meant it.

Then, I asked him if he would stay in the service.

Without hesitating, he said he’d do 30 years – he’d be a “lifer”,
and I could see he meant that, too.

What these encounters taught me is that all military people – whether that’s
Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Coast Guard, or Merchant Marine
have all been through some kind of boot-camp or ‘basic training’.

That’s something that all veterans have in common –

and to have stories they’d be telling for the rest of their lives...

Willard, p.2

What is someone's story? What is your experience?

What may be your 'baptism by fire',
that has brought you to where you are, today?

We ask those who attend our Come & Consider Class

to tell the story of their faith journey and what brought them here.

To tell someone's story – that was one of the themes of the film, "Amistad"
which our Justice & Peace Committee presented a week ago, Tuesday night.

The "Amistad" was a slave ship, taking its human cargo

to plantations in the Caribbean, when the slaves overpowered the crew and
forced the survivors to bring them back to Africa.

Instead, they were betrayed – heading east by day, only to turn north at night,
until they were intercepted by the US Navy after weeks at sea,
nearly starving to death.

The Africans were brought to court where they were tried for mutiny and murder.

The Spanish owners laid claim to them as merchandise,
while the American naval officers claimed them as salvage.

It became an international affair as the Queen of Spain demanded their return,

while our Southern States pressured Pres. Martin Van Buren
not to free them because of the precedent it might set

in the fight to abolish slavery –
for this was 1839 and our country, even then,
teetered on the brink of civil war.

Time and again, the defense proved their case in court,

but each time, the federal government sought an appeal –
until it was finally decided in the Supreme Court,
where 7 of the 9 judges were slave-owners themselves...

A principle character in this story was former president, John Quincy Adams,

who was portrayed in the film as reluctant to assist the defense team –
but gave them just a bit of advice, by asking a question:

What's their story? Who are they?

Who are these people and where did they come from?

Seeing the humanity of another person of a different social group,
even when they are embroiled in an ethical crisis,

helps to undo the prejudice that may surround them –
helps to discern the truth.

Willard, p.3

25 years after my conversations with those Coastguardsmen
and my own military service and subsequent entry into ordained ministry,
I knew very little about the Amistad when Steven Spielberg came
to Mystic, CT to make a movie about it.

At that time,

I was serving as associate pastor for Mystic Congregational Church.

The film, “Amistad”, portrayed the captives as people, who were unjustly taken
from their homeland in Sierra Leone on the west coast of Africa.

By 1839, the trafficking of slaves was outlawed by international law,
though slavery was permitted where it already existed and
slaves themselves were considered to be property.

Illegal smuggling of African people still went on –
and these Africans had been abducted and sold
under the pretense that they had been born in Cuba.

The way it was discovered they were originally from Africa,
was brought home, dramatically when their defense lawyer
drew a crude map on the ground of the prison courtyard.

He was trying to get the leader of the Africans, Sengbe Pieh,
to understand this question – where were they from?

When Sengbe Pieh realized what was being asked,
he silently walked a hundred feet away to show the immense distance
of the terrible journey that brought him and the others
to the New World.

It was at this point in the film that the personal story of Sengbe Pieh was told –
how he’d been captured in western Africa and brought under
inhuman conditions by the huge Portuguese slave ship, Tecora,
to the Caribbean, by what was called The Middle Passage.

Upon arrival in Cuba, Sengbe Pieh was sold along with the other captives,
then, transported by the Amistad to the Caribbean plantations,
where they would ultimately serve as slaves.

Proving that the Africans had not been born in the Caribbean, but had been
illegally transported there, was substantiated
when the cargo manifest of the Tecora was found.

But it was the impassioned plea of Sengbe Pieh in the courtroom,
“Give us, us free!” – “Give us freedom!”

that further personified the plight of these fifty-three human beings.

After 2 years of imprisonment and multiple trials –

John Quincy Adams testified on their behalf before the Supreme Court,
and the Africans were freed at last, to eventually return home.

Willard, p. 4

The film, “Amistad” also gave insight to the wrangling of 1840’s politics over the issue of slavery, not unlike the politics of our own time, in terms of sharp lines of division for reasons of race, religion, and the economy.

The director, Steven Spielberg, said this about the experience:

“The film [Amistad] will never leave any of us.

We can walk away from the production,
but the subject will always be with us.

It’s just something I’m really glad I had a part in.

While making this film, I never felt I was telling someone else’s story.

I felt very much like I was telling everyone’s story.

This is a story that people of all nationalities and races should know.”

Unfortunately, the role of Congregational abolitionists in the film was little more than caricatures of religious people.

Our Congregational forebears had been very active in supporting the Africans’ trial defense, as well as educating and clothing them.

Right after the film, construction began in 1998 of a replica of the Amistad – Hundreds of spectators, including representatives from various government, educational, social, and religious institutions, as well as descendants of Sengbe Pieh from Sierra Leone, came to Mystic Seaport to witness ‘the laying of the keel’.

The Rev. Dr. Davida Foy Crabtree, the Conference Minister for Connecticut UCC, was also there to do a blessing.

It took 2 years to build this boat – just as it had taken 2 years for the Africans to win their freedom.

Months before this new Amistad was completed,

I had the privilege to escort The Rev. Dr. Shelby Rooks,
Executive Minister of the UCC Board of Homeland Ministries,
to go aboard the re-creation of this ship.

As an African- American,

the history of the Amistad had been a personal passion for him
and a dream come true to walk aboard its deck.

For many years, Dr. Rooks had promoted the development of educational materials about “The Amistad Event”

as being a significant part of our church’s heritage.

Willard, p.5

We see in this crisis over slavery in American society back then,
the continuing crisis for the Church in American society today
over how we interpret the Bible.

Is the Bible to be taken literally –
even to justify a social evil as it was historically with slavery,
or may it be open to interpretation symbolically –
and at risk of abuse that way?

Is the Bible only to be a source of personal devotion –
or may it be used to justify political action?

The debate about the interpretation of the Bible and the role of the Church
in such social issues, continues.

Nevertheless, the challenge always before us is to do what is just.
The failure to do so about slavery in this country, led to the Civil War.

In our military, enlistees choose to subject themselves to
the privations and humiliations of basic training –
this is the shared experience by all military veterans.

As difficult as these experiences can be,
they are in no way to be compared with the abuses of human slavery
where those who were enslaved had no choice –
except the option to strive to be free.

However, what we need to learn from the Amistad story is
our shared humanity with those Africans who were sent
where they did not wish to go,
yet inspired compassion for their quest for freedom and human dignity.

In the gospel lesson, Jesus points out that people who were caught
in a tragic accident were no worse than anyone else –
they were not deserving of that tragedy.

In the lesson from Corinthians, on the other hand,
those who did what was wrong – even though they were part
of that privileged group that had been rescued from Egypt,
were still held accountable for their behavior in the wilderness.

Jesus and the Apostle Paul both warn of judgment
and perhaps we need to see the same potential risks,
if as a society, we don't do the right thing.

We need to see our common experience as human beings –
whether our stories are as dramatic, or less so, as someone else's,
but connected just the same.

We need to recognize our common plight with those less fortunate
as people with a story to tell.

Willard, p.6

Though in my opinion, Congregational abolitionists
were unfairly caricatured in the film, "Amistad",
one scene stands out for me
attesting to the power of the Christian story itself...

One of the African captives roughly grabs a Bible out of the hands
of a religious person standing by the door to the courthouse.
But much later in the story, it is shown that this accused slave
was deeply affected by the illustrations in the Bible, which portrayed Jesus
as a great man who healed with his hands and protected his people.
How he was judged – as the Africans were being judged,
and was killed as they feared they would be killed,
but who came back to life to go up to heaven,
which gave this man hope, no matter what the outcome
that lay ahead for him.

His story is also our story. Christ's story is also our story.
We are all in the same boat.

Amen

*Our lesson today is from 1Corinthians 10:1-13
and it teaches us that temptation is a problem for us all.
Not even baptism is a guarantee against the trouble of sin,
but God is at hand to help us in how we make our choices.*

- 10 Friends, I want to remind you that all of our ancestors
walked under the cloud and went through the sea.
2 This was like being baptized and becoming followers of Moses.
3 All of them also ate the same spiritual food
4 and drank the same spiritual drink,
which flowed from the spiritual rock that followed them.
That rock was Christ.
5 But most of them did not please God.
So they died, and their bodies were scattered all over the desert.
6 What happened to them is a warning to keep us from
wanting to do the same evil things.
7 They worshiped idols, just as the Scriptures say,
“The people sat down to eat and drink. Then they got up to dance around.”
So don’t worship idols.
8 Some of those people did shameful things,
and in a single day about twenty-three thousand of them died.
Don’t do shameful things as they did.
9 And don’t try to test Christ,
as some of them did and were later bitten by poisonous snakes.
10 Don’t even grumble, as some of them did
and were killed by the destroying angel.
11 These things happened to them as a warning to us.
All this was written in the Scriptures to teach us who live in these last days.
12 Even if you think you can stand up to temptation,
be careful not to fall.
13 You are tempted in the same way that everyone else is tempted.
But God can be trusted not to let you be tempted too much,
and he will show you how to escape from your temptations.

Luke 13:1-9

13:1 About this same time Jesus was told that

Pilate had given orders for some people from Galilee to be killed
while they were offering sacrifices.

2 Jesus replied:

Do you think that these people were worse sinners

than everyone else in Galilee just because of what happened to them?

3 Not at all! But you can be sure that if you don't turn back to God,
every one of you will also be killed.

4 What about those eighteen people who died
when the tower in Siloam fell on them?

Do you think they were worse than
everyone else in Jerusalem?

5 Not at all! But you can be sure that if you don't turn back to God,
every one of you will also die.

6 Jesus then told them this story:

A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard.

One day he went out to pick some figs, but he didn't find any.

7 So he said to the gardener,

“For three years I have come looking for figs on this tree,
and I haven't found any yet. Chop it down!

Why should it take up space?”

8 The gardener answered,

“Master, leave it for another year.

I'll dig around it and put some manure on it to make it grow.

9 Maybe it will have figs on it next year.

If it doesn't, you can have it cut down.”