

Friend of God: Frederick Douglass
Psalm 1, Luke 6:17-26
February 11, 2007

On an unknown day in February 1818, a second son was born to a black slave, Harriet. The child's father was unknown, but presumed to be the mother's master, Aaron Anthony, a white man. His mother named him Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. She was forced to give him up when finished nursing so she could go back to work on the plantation in the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Frederick was raised by his grandmother, with scores of other children whose mothers spent the daylight hours working and nights recuperating from their hard labor. Frederick saw his mother a precious few times when she had the energy to walk 12 miles from the plantation where she worked to the farm where Frederick lived. She died when he was seven years old.

When of age, his grandmother walked Frederick to the plantation to assume his role as a slave. He slept in the kitchen of the master. One night he heard the shrieks of his aunt as she was being whipped by their owner. Frederick was sent to Baltimore to live with extended family of his owner. The woman of the house was kindhearted and taught Frederick to read, until her husband put a stop to it. He said that an educated slave was a bad slave. Frederick knew then that learning to read and write would be critical to securing his freedom. He was sent to work at a shipyard.

He attended various churches until he found a preacher he could trust. A black preacher, Charles Lawson read and discussed the scriptures with the young man. Rev. Lawson told Fredrick that he was destined to become a mighty preacher who would be involved in a great work. Out of these teachings "came tolerance for the weakness of humankind. Instead of blaming slaveholders for their sins, he blamed the system for corrupting people who might otherwise have been humane."

Frederick earned a few pennies a week from his work on the waterfront. With 50 pennies, he bought a copy of the book, *The Columbian Orator*, and hid it in his room. In the *Baltimore American*, he read stories of abolitionists, people who were speaking out about the sin of slavery. He read of former president John Quincy Adams, who introduced a petition in the House of Representatives declaring, "We believe slavery and the slave trade is a great national and moral evil."

At the age of 15 Frederick was sent back to Maryland to work for the master who had inherited him after the first owner's death. The owner decided that Frederick's spirit must be broken, so he hired him out to a

tenant farmer known as a tormentor of black people. Frederick was whipped, not because of disobedience, but rather to break his spirit as one broke an animal.

At the age of 18 Frederick was returned to Baltimore, where he worked as an apprentice at a shipyard. There he experienced the racism of Irish immigrants who had to compete with blacks for the least desirable employment.

While in Baltimore he joined a Methodist Church and The East Baltimore Improvement Society. It was there that he met Anna Murray. He was 19 and a slave; she was 24 and free. They fell in love and desired to be married. They plotted Frederick's escape. Disguised as a sailor with borrowed papers, he traveled north on the train to freedom. He arrived in New York and sent for Anna. She joined him and they were married in a private ceremony. The clergyman told them that New York was not a safe place for runaways, so they moved to Massachusetts. Frederick took the surname Douglass to make it more difficult for his owners to track him down.

Frederick and Anna had five children. They attended the Methodist Church but were not allowed to sit in the main body of the sanctuary and had to wait until all the white people had been served before they could receive communion. The North was not as friendly as they had expected.

Three years after escaping, Frederick attended a meeting of abolitionists. He was invited to speak. Totally unprepared, he simply told his personal story as a young slave in Maryland. The crowd of 1,000 was moved to tears and an ovation.

Anna managed the household, raised the children, and worked as a domestic servant. Frederick went on speaking tours with the abolitionists. Few in the North had ever seen a slave or a fugitive from slavery. Although threatened white colleagues warned him not to sound too "learned," Frederick honed his speaking skills. While traveling he experienced the humiliation of Jim Crow laws, often being kicked out of the train cars reserved for whites and booted to the car for blacks. The railroad eventually ordered the train not to stop in his town.

Even in the North on the lecture circuit, Frederick was subject to brutal attacks. In order to prove that he had been a slave, he wrote and published a memoir, telling of his childhood and youth, but not revealing his slave name nor the names of those who had helped him escape. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was published in 1845. The popularity of the memoir made him so conspicuous that he was forced to leave his native land to avoid capture and return to slavery.

He sailed to Great Britain and began a lecture tour. While slavery was illegal in Great Britain, the low wages paid to the working poor touched Frederick so that he wrote, "I cannot allow myself to be insensible to the wrongs and sufferings of any part of the great family of man." Nearly two years after he had left America as a fugitive slave, he returned home a free man. His English friends had raised the money to pay Frederick's owner for his freedom.

Back in the States he continued to lecture and also started a weekly paper, called *The North Star*, for the slaves sang, "I keep my eye on the bright North Star and think of liberty." It was editorial in nature and provided a venue for the expression of his views. He moved his family to Rochester, New York, a hub for abolitionists and advocates of women's rights. It was also a stop on the Underground Railroad. Frederick and Anna hosted many slaves traveling the railroad on their way to Canada.

Frederick found kindred spirits among the activists for women's rights. He believed that men and women of all races could live and work together. Everyone deserved equal rights and an equal chance. He said, "This is the cause of human brotherhood as well as the cause of human sisterhood and both must rise and fall together."

In 1860 Abraham Lincoln was elected President. Lincoln hated slavery but would not call himself an abolitionist. Douglass urged the president to issue an emancipation proclamation and enroll thousands of willing eager black men into the Union Army. When the Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1, 1863, Douglass set to work on recruitment of soldiers, advocacy of equal rights for black soldiers, and protection for black prisoners of war. A senator introduced him to President Lincoln who listened to his pleas on behalf of his black comrades. Later the President called Douglass to his office to consult on critical issues.

Douglass attended the president's reception on the evening of his second inauguration. Two policemen initially forbid him entrance. He sent word through another guest, "Tell the President that Fred is here." He was let in. When Lincoln asked Douglass his opinion of the second inaugural address, he replied, "Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort." Lincoln thanked him and said, "There's no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours." Douglass wrote of Lincoln, "He was the first great man that I talked with in the United States freely, who in no single instance reminded me of the difference between himself and myself, or the difference of color." Upon his untimely death, Mary Lincoln had the President's favorite walking cane sent to Douglass.

At the age of 36 he returned to St. Michaels in Maryland. He met his master who had sent him to the brutal farmer who whipped him. The master wept openly. Douglass was criticized by some for offering forgiveness to his master.

Two years after Anna's death, Frederick remarried a white woman, Helen Pitts. He was profoundly criticized for his mixed marriage. He said, "My first wife was the color of my mother, and the second, the color of my father." He continued his advocacy work on behalf of blacks in the South, for Lincoln's program of Reconstruction broke down. Free black men and women were not paid living wages, but paid in handwritten "scrip" redeemable only in the general store of their employers, who charged outrageous prices. Even though free, many blacks were left destitute.

On February 20, 1895, Douglass spoke with Susan B. Anthony at the National Council of Women. That evening at home he collapsed and died at the age of 77.

While the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery and involuntary servitude, the fight against racism continues long afterward. And sadly, there are an estimated 27 million slaves in the world today. Today's slaves are not bought and sold at public auctions; nor do their owners hold legal title to them. Yet they are trapped, controlled and brutalized.

The poor, uneducated, women, children, indigenous or marginalized people are made vulnerable by poverty and powerlessness. They are often forced or tricked into slavery. The majority of slaves today are bonded laborers in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. The CIA and U.S. State Department estimate that over 50,000 women and children are trafficked into the U.S. each year.

Slavery is illegal in virtually every country worldwide, but governments are rarely willing to enforce the law or to punish those who profit from slavery.

The fight for freedom for all, for equal right and equal chance, continues today. Jesus declares his blessing upon those who are poor, hungry, and weeping; blessing upon those who are hated, excluded, and reviled. Jesus embraces the vulnerable and promotes them as citizens of God's realm. Systems that perpetuate poverty and injustice are condemned. Jesus envisions a reversal of fortunes and the reign of freedom. For even the oppressor is not truly free. Douglass noted of his original master, "Old master very early impressed me with the idea that he was an unhappy man. Even to my child's eye, he wore a troubled, and at times, haggard aspect....He was a wretched man, at war with his own soul, and with all the world around him."

Today as we look toward the bright North Star, may we think, pray and act for liberty. Liberty for slaves, for women, for workers. Liberty for all God's children.

Frederick Douglass: For the Great Family of Man, by Peter Burchard, New York: Atheneum Books, 2003.

"I Keep My Eye on the Bright North Star..." by Rev. Bob Olmstead, First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California, January 7, 2001.

Slavery in the 21st Century, Part One, *Free the Slaves*, www.freetheslaves.net.

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