

**“Slavery Is Not an Indefinable Mass of Flesh: Nanne’s Life Matters”**

**A Sermon by the Rev. John Gibbons**

**The First Parish in Bedford, Unitarian Universalist**

**2 February 2020**

**Opening Words**

“How we eat is connected to how we care for the planet  
which is connected to how we use our resources  
which is connected to how many people in the world go to bed hungry every night  
which is connected to how food is distributed  
which is connected to the massive inequalities in our world between those who  
have and those who don't  
which is connected to how our justice system treats people who use their power and  
position to make hundreds of millions of dollars while others struggle just to buy  
groceries  
which is connected to how we treat those who don't have what we have  
which is connected to the sanctity and holiness and mystery of our human life and  
their human life and their little human life  
which is why we hold up that baby's hand and say to the parents, 'it's just so small.’”

— **Rob Bell**, *What We Talk about When We Talk about God*

**Readings**

From Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (read by Renae Nichols):

*Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is as active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods, who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in a nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dressmaking and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent and capable as anyone. “Slavery” is this same woman born in a world that loudly proclaims its love of freedom and inscribes this love in its essential texts, a world in which these same professors hold this woman a slave, hold her mother a slave, her father a slave, her daughter a slave, and when this woman peers back into the generations all she sees is the enslaved. She can hope for more. She can imagine some future for her grandchildren. But when she dies, the world—which is really the only world she can ever know—ends. For this woman, enslavement is not a parable. It is damnation. It is the never-ending night. And the length of that night is most of our history. Never forget that we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free. Never forget that for 250 years black people were born into chains—whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains.*

From the *Tao Te Ching*, attributed to Lao Tzu, Chapter 11:

*Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;  
It is the center hole that makes it useful.  
Shape clay into a vessel;  
It is the space within that makes it useful.  
Cut doors and windows for a room;  
It is the holes which make it useful.  
Therefore profit comes from what is there;  
Usefulness from what is not there.*

### **Sermon**

Last summer I read a dazzling book by Robert Macfarlane, titled *Underland*. We're accustomed to pay attention to the things above land, what we can see, the landscape, the built environment, you and me. *Underland* is about what we do not readily see, underground caverns, catacombs, caves, and mines, deep and dark enveloping woods and thickets, and the people we do not see. In London and Paris, New York and Boston, beneath where alabaster cities gleam, there is a nearly invisible parallel universe of sewers, shafts, subterranean ways, and their habitués, people who live there.

Often this phenomenon is true of history and our experience. We see you and me, not others. We see only what seems obvious and we do not see what we do not wish to see or what others do not want us to see.

We meet on this Town Common, made historic as the mustering ground for the Minuteman who fought in the American Revolution on behalf of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness - for white propertied men.

Inscribed on our beloved Bedford Flag, carried to the Old North Bridge in 1775 are the words *VINCE AUT MORIRE* - "Conquer Or Die."

Who conquered? Who was conquered? Who died?

It was the white British settler colonials who conquered the native peoples who lived here – the Wampanoag, Nipmuc, Pennacook and others - and who thus brought death, subjugation, keening unhappiness, and genocide to indigenous Americans.

In King Philip's War and the French and Indian Wars, it was men, of course, who did most of the killing but in 1704 it was a woman – Mary Lane – who shot and killed with impunity. There was a colonial garrison just up North Road (where the Habitat for Humanity homes are now), and looking through a window in the roof of the

garrison, Mary Lane thought she saw something suspicious behind a stump. A soldier refused to take Mary seriously, so she grabbed his gun, fired it, and – the history book records, “a dead Indian rolled into view.” I wonder what his name was?

Confirming the conquest of the natives by the settler colonials, Bedford was incorporated in 1729 with the requirement that a school and meetinghouse be built – right here! - and a learned man of good conversation be installed as its minister.

Bedford's first minister was Nicholas Bowes, and he lived just over there on Great Road in the Domine Manse (Nat Brown's law offices). He lived there with his family, and with a young woman whom Bowes had purchased and enslaved as his servant. Her seldom-spoken name was Nanne. Her name was Nanne and she was enslaved.

Today, beneath the plaque that honors Nicholas Bowes, we dedicate that small new plaque in remembrance of Nanne. As our act of dedication, I ask you to stand as you are able and together we will say and repeat her name. (Bell sound)

Let us say her name. (“Nanne”) We'll say it again. And now, as if we are calling her name across a great meadow, let us shout her name. (“NANNE”) And we'll shout it again. And now let us lean close to Nanne and whisper her name. (“Nanne”) And whisper it again.

And now, in the echoing silence, as Nanne's name is inscribed upon our hearts, let us bear witness as Renae Nichols (as an heir to Nanne's legacy) and I (as an heir to the legacy of Nicholas Bowes) place wreaths of remembrance by the plaques that now recognize both. We see you, we recognize ourselves in you, your history is our history, we are connected, we will not forget, we remember.

*Ta-Nehisi Coates said, “Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is as active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods, who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in a nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dressmaking and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent and capable as anyone.”*

How old was Nanne? A teenager? Did she marry or have children? Did she grow old? When did she die? Where is she buried? Was she well-treated or abused...as if it can be said that an enslaved person *could be* well-treated or if it can be said that enslavement is *anything else* but abuse? What would Nanne think of our singing “If you want to be free, be free?” What would Bowes think?

In further recognition of Nanne, Bowes, and their complicated connected legacy, there are baskets of rosemary being passed among you. Rosemary is symbolic of remembrance and may be crushed and smelled, or dried and made into tea, or used

as seasoning and eaten. May its fragrance and taste recall the particular, specific, enslaved woman we know as Nanne.

In 1641, Massachusetts was the first colony to legalize slavery. By the mid-1700's nearly one in ten people in colonial Boston were enslaved.

It was common for ministers to have enslaved servants. Even later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of the Revolution, the minister in Concord enslaved three persons. The British scorned his calls for liberty and called out his hypocrisy.

The anti-slavery movement in Britain was much more advanced than in America, and slavery would be abolished there in 1833.

Only recently have I learned that one of the many causes of the American Revolution was the defense of slavery. You know, that isn't much mentioned in our history books or on Patriots or Pole Capping Days....

Colonial officials encouraged enslaved people to seek their freedom by fleeing to British lines. Many of the enslaved came to see the struggle as one between their freedom and their continued subjugation.

In the 1775 Dunsmore Proclamation, the governor of Virginia offered freedom to any enslaved person who fled their plantation and joined the British Army. Historian Jill Lepore writes, "Not the taxes and the tea, not the shots at Lexington and Concord, not the siege of Boston; rather, it was Dunsmore's offer of freedom to slaves, that tipped the scales in favor of American independence."

New England's obvious and much-celebrated industry – think of the cotton mills of Lowell and Lawrence – was entirely dependent on and complicit with the enslavement of black Africans.

White supremacy was enforced by *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, and it is no accident that these suburbs, even unto the present day, are predominantly white and wealthy, due to red-lining by realtors and the post-WWII exclusion of African-Americans from the benefits of the GI Bill.

There is a subterranean hidden history to Bedford and these suburbs and our country – and our world.

This beautiful Bedford is a perfect example of what James Baldwin once called "the sunlit playpen of white American existence." We live in such a sunlit playpen. Those who challenge this status quo – be they people of color, or immigrants, or Jews or gay people, or journalists, or truth-tellers, or who knows who will be next?...they will be threatened, intimidated, and quite possibly killed.

We live in a country wracked by racism, misogyny, militarism, xenophobia,

rapacious capitalism, and a federal government of kakistocrats (my new favorite word, *kakistocracy*, which means government by the least suitable, least competent, the very worst people imaginable) ...they whose words and deeds defend the rich, white, male, and powerful, they who fan the flames of hatred and misery, and they who promise death to any who challenge their supremacy.

Last summer I was in Selma, Alabama where the cemetery is bedecked in Confederate flags and where, in 2002 when a black person was first elected mayor, the white citizens of Selma in response erected a bust of Nathan Bedford Forrest, the founder of the KKK. In 2002! In no uncertain terms that statue says, mess with white supremacy and you will be lynched.

And, again, it was James Baldwin who also said, "There are too many things we do not wish to know about ourselves." Indeed, shielded from our eyes, there is a parallel universe of agony and oppression.

It is past time for us to see the history that is hidden underland, obscured by thickets of myth and wishful thinking.

Here we see you and me. Who do we not see?

This is not just a sermon about the poison of white supremacy that still laces our water. This is not just a sermon about Nanne, nor is it just about Bowes – whom we do not castigate for, "first, we must remove the beam out of our own eye, and then we may see clearly to remove the speck out of our brother's eye."

Rather, this is a sermon about all that is under-land and unseen, the aspects of ourselves to which we are blind or willfully ignorant.

I digress but slightly to say that we live in an apocalyptic time. You know, after my very first sermon as a student minister in Akron, Ohio everyone was given an index card to give me feedback and, of course, I was told to stand up straight and "stand up to be seen, speak up to be heard, and sit down to be appreciated" but somehow in that sermon I mentioned the word "apocalypse" and I received a card from a man who had studied for the priesthood and on his card he wrote, "Preach that sermon all your life." I still have that card someplace, and every once in a while I wonder what the heck he meant? And so this week I looked up the word apocalypse and it is a Greek word **meaning** "revelation", "an unveiling or unfolding of things not previously known and which could not be known apart from the unveiling." Today is an apocalyptic moment in the life of this congregation: we are unveiling a hidden history not previously known. Now is an apocalyptic time in our nation, world and planet where many things, long obscured, are becoming obvious. Perhaps such things are being revealed in your own life as well?

But, you know, such revelation is what we as a faith community are about or what we should be about all the time: Here we reveal and unveil that which is hidden or

to which we have been willfully ignorant. Here together we try to reveal the truth about our selves, individually, systemically, collectively. We expose the cruelty of family separation, the sins of and prejudice and greed and corruption, the chasm of inequalities; we lament and confess how we ourselves fall short of the admonitions of conscience and spirit. We are not the people we want to be.

Here, too, we affirm that hope abides, that there is health in us, and that while prayer may not change a thing, prayer does change people, and people change things, and thus we pray for the coming of the apocalypse, and for revival in each and every one of us, that we may more clearly see.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, we heard,

*Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;  
It is the center hole that makes it useful.  
Shape clay into a vessel;  
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Therefore profit comes from what is there;  
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Someone else has said, "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about." Including each and every one of ourselves.

I fight such battles and I know you do also. This is a sermon about humility, a sermon about recognizing and confessing all that we do not know. A sermon that asks the question, "Who is **not** in this room?" Young people, old people, people of color, people of differing abilities and genders and addictions, and opinions?

Yes, we too often speak in an echo chamber. How might we see and hear and feel those not in the room and evident? How may we bring to the center those who are at the margins? How may we de-center those who are privileged? What of ourselves do we not see?

These are questions for you, for me, for each of our families, for this congregation, this community, this country, this planet. May we call things by their true names. May we not be blinded in this sunlit playpen of white experience.

Once more, let us say her name: Nanne.

May we ask, and humbly answer, "Who and what is not here? What is not evident?" Underland, unseen, we are people of faith who affirm that which was said in our opening words.....We are connected to how we treat those who don't have what we have. We are connected to Nanne and to Nicholas Bowes. And we are connected to the lives of those in our families and our communities, remembered and forgotten,

which is connected to the sanctity and holiness and mystery of all life  
and we are connected to our very own striving and struggling human lives  
and we are connected to the very littlest of human lives which is why we hold up a  
baby's hands and say, 'it's just so small.

May it be so.

**Closing Words**

*May we dedicate ourselves to the proposition that beneath all our diversity and behind all our differences there is a unity which makes us one and binds us forever together in spite of time, and death, and the space between the stars. Let us pause in silent witness to that Unity. (Mark Morrison-Reed)*