

Wade in the Water: A Juneteenth Reflection

June 18, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Deuteronomy 30: 15-19

John 5: 1-8

A Poem for Cicely by Paula Paris

Wade in the water! This is the theme for this beautiful piece of fabric art in progress that hangs behind me and it has emerged, as if from an underground spiritual stream, from stories like Cicely's (Thank you, Paula for that powerful poem!) and from Cuba and Tony's and more! Friends, I'm not sure I can find words for what this moment means to me or to us, but I would like to share a bit of context about how it came to be, and deep gratitude to everyone on our advisory group, especially Sarah for the inspiration and Gail and Carole Anne for the artistry and Egypt and her family for the ancestry and loving participation, and Paula and Marieke and Laurie and Stef and Sarah for the local history and First Church connection.

This project has been Spirit-led every step of the way, organically emerging from our first conversations. Yet it begins before then, with a history of violation that dates back centuries, and it begins in stories of generational resilience connected to enslaved persons living in captivity and working within a quarter mile from where we now sit. It begins in stories that have for centuries been erased, denied, and willfully forgotten, and it begins before then, too, in stories that go even farther back to our spiritual ancestors in scripture and to the Spirit's calls to freedom that have been resounding from the beginning of creation. I'll come back to this.

First, as some of you know, more than a decade ago, we discovered names of over 100 enslaved persons in our membership records. At the time, we thought it was impossible to trace living descendants, from over 200 years ago. The records were too thin. That has largely been true, but remarkably, the first descendants identified were of Cuba and Tony Vassall, two persons once enslaved in Cambridge who are listed on our First Church records because Cuba was baptized at First Church late in life when she was a free woman. Today, with us are several of Cuba and Tony's descendants. We met Dennis last year in this service, but sadly Egypt and her daughters' flights were delayed. They all made it today and we are thrilled!

Over a year ago, though it feels like longer, Paula Paris offered to introduce Dave Kidder and I to Dennis and Egypt, so we could share our church's connection with their ancestors. By way of a bit of background, Tony and Cuba Vassal were enslaved in Cambridge by Henry Vassal and Penelope Royall, a marriage that joined two of the largest slaveholding families in Massachusetts. They were members at Christ Church Episcopal down the street. In 1740, Henry Vassal brought Tony to Cambridge from Jamaica. Penelope Royall brought Cuba to Cambridge from the Royall House in Medford—where Cuba had been brought as a child from the family's sugar plantation in Antigua. Tony and Cuba, though enslaved, were married, and eventually lived at what is now Longfellow House around the corner where a Juneteenth celebration will continue later today. When Henry, Penelope and other the British loyalist enslavers fled the area, Tony petitioned the Commonwealth that he and his family “shall not be denied the sweets of freedom the remainder of their days by being reduced to the painful necessity of begging for bread.” The Commonwealth granted Tony a meager pension of 12 pounds a year out of the proceeds from the sale of this estate. Tony bought his own five-acre farm on a lot where the Marathon Sports

store now stands on Mass Ave between Harvard and Porter squares. When he died, his wife Cuba successfully petitioned to keep the pension. One of their children, Darby would become a local activist and helped found the mutual aid organization the African Society in Boston in 1796, and he petitioned the legislature to fund an African School Association to educate free “people of color” in Boston. For reasons unknown, he was buried in a tomb, alongside his enslavers, Henry and Penelope Vassall, at Christ Church. As I mentioned earlier, Cuba first appears on our records in a particular way, almost 30 years after slavery was made illegal in Massachusetts. Sept 13, 1812. “Cuba Vassal(Negro Woman) baptized by her own desire (in private, dangerously ill).” She died three days later, in 1816. She was baptized in this community as a free woman.

As we’ve said before, these are, as scholar Saidiya Hartman says, “stories impossible to tell” both because if we take the time to sit them, they are unspeakably painful. They are also impossible to tell because there is still so much we don’t know, so many unanswered questions, including why Cuba chose to be baptized, and why here at First Church.

When I first met Dennis and Egypt on Zoom just over a year ago, I shared with them how Cuba’s name was listed. Of course, they already had the broader story of their ancestors, but neither had heard about the baptism. I ask how it landed for them. In a moment I will never forget, Egypt said she immediately thought about her daughters and their baptism. That was our first conversation. There have been many beautiful conversations since. Egypt will share more in a moment about what all this means to her but first, briefly back to our theme...

Wade in the Water....

Enslaved persons sang this ‘sorrow song,’ this spiritual, to recall the Exodus, the ancient journey of the Israelites from slavery to freedom, and to evoke the crossing of the Jordan into the promised land!

The theme recalls too the Jordan River where Jesus himself was baptized, where the Spirit descended upon him like a dove and called Jesus beloved, in a profound moment of individual calling yet also of solidarity with all of humanity who was there in the river with him waiting to know God’s love!

And it recalls the healing pools of Bethesda when an angelic messenger of God would periodically to stir and trouble and activate the waters to make them healing waters! Can’t we sense that messenger touching down today?

It evokes the oceans of trauma, violence, and grief of the Middle Passage, and the rivers of sorrow about which Laurie sang.

And here, in Cambridge, we may wonder if enslaved persons sang it here, as they lived in those riverside estates built by Caribbean plantation fortunes all along the Charles. Today, together, we wade into these same waters of creation, of remembrance, of healing, baptism, together as descendants of enslaved and enslavers! We ask God’s Spirit to trouble and stir these waters and also to stitch and weave us into a new fabric!

Wade in the Waters, indeed!

Thank you again so much for sharing this journey with us, Egypt, and Dennis, Nia and Noel. We could not be here without you and I can't wait to say what the Spirit has in store as we keep wading into the waters together!

