Written Sermon “Of Bone and Sinew” Anthony Mtuaswa Johnson

Good Morning and Welcome to the Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation.

I welcome you in the name of the Ancestors, on whose shoulders I stand,

and I welcome you in the name of all that is holy and sacred, to you.

It is indeed an honor and a pleasure to be able to share this space with you on this

beautiful morning.

I am Anthony Mtuaswa Johnson serving as intern minister at the Sedona Unitarian

Universalist Fellowship, in Sedona.

My personal appreciation for the principles of Unitarian Universalism are best summed

up in the welcoming words adapted from the Unitarian Church of Dublin, Ireland, and I quote:

“we do not ask what you believe,

or expect you to think the way we do,

but only that you try to live a kindly, helpful life,

 with the dignity proper to a human being.

welcome, all who believe that religion is wider than any sect

and deeper than any set of opinions,

welcome all who might find in our friendship, strength and

encouragement for daily living.”

Today’s sermon is entitled “Of Bone and Sinew”

This title comes from the words of one Mr. William Craft.

Justice is this month’s Touchstone theme

and when Rev. Kevin extended the invitation to preach here in Flagstaff

the story of Ellen and William Craft resonated in my bones.

In the spiritual tradition of the Dagara people of Burkina Faso, in West Africa,

there is the belief that our memories our stored in our bones.

When I read the story of Ellen and William craft, I felt it, it

resonated in my bones. We have a fancy, scientific name for it in our culture we call it

DNA!

William and his wife Ellen were brave and fervent warriors for justice.

I admire and honor their unique American story of justice and of love.

A justice and love story set in a peculiar institution, as it has been referred to throughout

our history.

 In the words of William craft; and I quote “it is true, our condition as slaves were not by

any means the worst, but the thought that we couldn’t call the bones and sinews that god

gave us our own: but above all, the fact that another man had the power to tear from our

cradle the new-born babe and sell it in the shambles like a brute, and then scourge us if

we dared to lift a finger to save it from such a fate, haunted us for years.”

Ellen and William Craft’s pursuit of justice and freedom led to an adventurous

escape from what one might call a perpetual haunting.

A haunting to honor their natural desire to experience the love of each other and

 future generations, as free human beings. Their story is one of many love stories

caught in the grips of that peculiar institution known as American slavery.

The true story of former slaves William and Ellen craft and their relationship

with Unitarian minister Theodore Parker can serve as a template for a present day

reflection upon racial justice in the 21st Century. We cannot imagine the haunting feeling

of our new born child sleeping next to us and knowing that he or she could be

legally taken away from you at any moment?

William and Ellen’s adventurous escape emanated from this perpetual haunting,

this natural desire to experience the love of each other, and of future generations,

as free human beings. I can feel Ellen and I can picture William plotting, sweating and

eventually winning their freedom and honoring their love for one another.

Close your minds eyes for just a moment…imagine as best as one can, what it

must have been like to be a slave in America. this “peculiar institution” was like no

other type of slavery in human history.

It was like being an orphan in a family of all orphans and for many, many

generations. Orphans who actually knew who their mother was but saw their mothers

them taken from them, at a moment’s notice, or with no notice at all. Her feelings didn’t

matter, they didn’t matter, after all, they were not people, they were property.

William Craft worked as a cabinet maker and learned a valuable trade.

His cabinet maker skills allowed William a certain amount of limited autonomy few

slaves were fortunate enough to experience. Ellen worked as a “ladies’ slave”, a position of

favoritism within the white household where she was enslaved.

And so, it was. Then, four days before Christmas in 1848, the Crafts obtained passes from

their respective masters to travel to the next town for the Christmas holiday.

That Christmas, William and Ellen began their harrowing and life-threatening journey to

the north. Using the money William had saved from his apprenticeship as a cabinet

maker, they bought first-class tickets and boarded a train in Savannah, Georgia.

How did they do that?

Ellen was a light skinned African-American and could pass for white, as did my own

aunts, Ruth and Clemestine. Ellen and William traveled first class posing as master and

slave. Their bold plan was to disguise Ellen as a white gentleman in need of medical

treatment, her arm in a sling to cover up her inability to write her name.

William would to travel with her as her faithful slave.

Yes, Ellen dressed up as a white man!! Stretching the non-binary in a unique way.

They traveled by first class train and steamboat through the coasts of South Carolina,

North Carolina, Virginia, Washington D.C., and Maryland

arriving in Philadelphia on Christmas day of 1848.

The Crafts spent three weeks with a Quaker family that took them in and

provided them with love, food and shelter. In January of 1849, they arrived in Boston,

after traveling over 1000 miles seeking their freedom.

Upon arrival in Boston, they boarded at the home of Lewis Hayden, a free black man

whose boarding house often served as a safe house for fugitive slaves on the underground

railroad. William found work as a cabinet maker and Ellen as a seamstress.

But it didn’t take Ellen and William’s masters long to send agents after them, following

the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.

On October 20, 1850 agents Willis Hughes and John Knight showed up in Boston to

capture and return their “property” to their rightful owner. Black Bostonians and their

white allies joined together to thwart the efforts of the slave catchers.

I was especially moved to hear that the slave catchers every move was documented in the

popular Liberator magazine, that they were verbally assaulted in the streets and were

arrested for slander.

After being in Boston for a month, finally, when confronted at their hotel room and

warned that their lives were in danger, Hughes and Knight left the city.

However, the Craft’s were well aware that the warrant for their arrest

was still in the hands of the Federal marshal.

The abolitionists in Boston responded by holding a meeting where they formed a group

called the League of Freedom to protect the capture of fugitive slaves. Two African-

American men were elected to lead. Lewis Hayden was elected president and William

Craft vice-president.

It was ten days later, on October 14, that the League of Freedom was absorbed into the

Boston Vigilance Committee, including blacks as well as whites, whose mission was “to

secure the colored inhabitants of Boston from any invasion of their rights.”

Together, to me, they were saying, yes indeed, Black Lives Matter!

Allow me a moment pause to give Ancestor Blessings to Patrisse, to Opal and to Alicia

the founders and leaders of the Black Lives matter movement.

Boston Vigilance Committee members transported Ellen and William craft to the home of

abolitionist Ellis g. Loring in Brookline and then to the home of one Theodore Parker.

While his wife stayed in the safety of Parker's house, William Craft armed

himself, and with support from the Committee on Vigilance he was able to

 move around Boston and keep away from the slave-catchers.

Theodore Parker heard that the slave-catchers had threatened to break into his house at

night. Determined to keep them out, Parker kept a loaded pistol at the ready.

Some Unitarian ministers criticized Parker for breaking the law, here's what he said:

"I have in my church black men [and women], fugitive slaves. they are the crown of my

apostleship, the seal of my ministry. It becomes me to look after their bodies in order to

'save their souls.' this [fugitive slave] law has brought us into the most intimate

connection with the sin of slavery. I have been obliged to take my own parishioners into

my house to keep them out of the clutches of the kidnapper. yes, gentlemen, I have been

obliged to do that; and then to keep my doors guarded by day as well as by night. Yes, I

have had to arm myself. I have written my sermons with a pistol in my desk, — loaded ...

and ready for action. yes, with a drawn sword within reach of my right hand. this I have

done in Boston; in the middle of the nineteenth century; been obliged to do it to defend

the [innocent] members of my own church, women as well as men!"

Though, I was born in southern Mississippi in the town of Hattiesburg, most of my

coming of age took place on the south side of Chicago. Every summer my family would

pile in our car, usually one of two or three vehicles making the journey, and

visit Mississippi. I remember asking my mom why was it that we always left so early in

 the morning, or as she would say; “fo day in the mornin’.” Before she could answer,

my uncle Johnny shouted out, “we leave fo day in the mornin’ to be sure we get to

Mississippi before sundown.” He went on to explain and joke about what could happen

to us if white folks or the police stopped us at night time. He then related one of his

favorite jokes; “remember that if you ever get caught running a red light, just say

you saw all the white folks going on green so you thought you should wait

your turn and go on red.” I was about eight years old at the time. Speaking of 8, it was in

1981, while serving as an officer in the United States Army that I experienced white

soldiers who refused to salute me. The vestiges remain.

Unlike Theodore Parker, many other abolitionists were against using violence, but after

the passage of the fugitive slave law, Parker did not agree with them. He often used the

proud history of the revolution as a way of bringing people to his point of view. He also

saw that over the years there had been a practice of erasing the memory of African

American participation in the revolution, and he was dedicated to reminding his fellow

Americans of the historic role blacks had played.

One person who read everything by Theodore Parker that he could get his

hands on was William Herndon of Illinois, Abraham Lincoln's law partner. Herndon

often passed along Parker's writings to Lincoln, who expressed his admiration for

it. In one sermon, Herndon had underlined the following words that he thought

would interest Lincoln: "democracy is direct self-government, over all the

people, for all the people, by all the people." Sound familiar?

Another quote from Parker plays a role in today’s fight for racial justice as paraphrased by

Martin Luther King, Jr. Parker said; “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe;

the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways;

I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight, I can

divine it by conscience. And from what I see, I am sure it bends towards justice.”

The Crafts were married in 1846 by Theodore Parker, though they had been living

together and had jumped the broom, years earlier. Soon after the wedding, William and

Ellen began to plot their escape to full freedom. Their dream of their children being born

in a country where they were free citizens remained a dream they were determined to

make real.

It took them two years of planning to arrive at a plan they believed could allow

them the opportunity to live lives as free people.

The Crafts traveled from Portland, Maine to Halifax, Nova Scotia and finally to Liverpool,

England where they remained until the end of the civil war.

William and Ellen Craft succeeded in reaching England safely in 1851. The year of the first

great exhibition, there they appeared and crowds of people went to see them. Two former

slaves who had escaped to England, two now-free people who sang "God save the queen"

to thank heaven for having escaped from the slave-catchers. Free to love and to live a life

they envisioned.

A poem came to me:

“Black lives matter, yes they do matter

Let us be like matter, and not scatter.

Gather hearts that will not tatter,

never mind the dissonant chatter.

We know we are different fruit,

Yet, all made from the same cosmic batter.

Please put your hands over your heart

Pat your chest where your beats,

Please repeat after me, there is

only one class of people,

people of the heart.

Only one nation. The nation of the heart.

There is only one gender.

The gender of the heart.

There is only one race,

the race of the heart.

May it be so.

Ashe, Amen, Blessed be,