

## “Remembering Dorcas”

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*First Church in Boston*

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What does it mean to *memorialize* a person? This is not only a question for monuments and public figures, but it is also present in the memorial services we hold as Unitarian Universalists when a person dies. Different than a funeral, a memorial service focuses more on the *life* of a person than centering their death. In practice, this means that a UU memorial service tends to include more personal remembrances than universal prayers. On the one hand, there can be tremendous comfort in hearing a familiar prayer amidst the turmoil of grief—such as the Jewish *Mourner’s Kaddish* or the Christian *Lord’s Prayer*. On the other hand, the personal nature of UU memorial services often deeply moves people with laughter and tears. Memorializing a person by recounting their life and character can convey respect, appreciation, and even love.

But such memorializing is not simple. Family members often struggle with what to say—and not say—about a loved one. As minister, I am often entrusted with complex truths about the person who has died. I hear stories not only of happy memories, but also of disappointment, conflict, and even abuse. Sometimes family members directly engage this complexity—noting that dad had a reputation for being overly outspoken or mom could be a bit judgmental. In these ways, the fuller truth of a life is gently present in the service. But sometimes, a family requests that the shadows and pain remain hidden. In one such situation, I spoke positively in the public memorial service of the deceased’s generosity and kindness to many, but at the private graveside service, I also named the truth of her painful harshness towards her children. The fuller truth is that our lives are interwoven with generosity and disappointment, kindness and indifference. Human life is never just a singular note.

Whether memorializing a life in a religious service or in public art, I think a similar challenge arises—how to tell a story of a life. Of course there are plenty of differences also. A memorial service typically arises amidst active grief and most attendees have direct relationships and knowledge of the deceased. Whereas public memorials (such as the Emerson bust in the narthex, the John Winthrop statue by the main entrance, or the many calligraphy portraits) often emerge at some distance of death and relationship. Furthermore, as a *public* object, public memorials are often intended to emphasize some aspect of a person’s *public* contribution. Elements of their lives perceived as *personal* may not be deemed germane.

But who decides what is and is not germane or important when telling the story of a person's life? OR when you are telling the story of an institution—or even of a nation—who determines which lives and stories are germane and important to tell?

Black History Month began as a response to this question of whose stories are told and how. The [roots of the Month](#) begin with a 1915 national celebration in Chicago of the fiftieth anniversary of emancipation. Noticing the overwhelming interest in exhibits on both the history of African Americans as well as their progress since slavery, African American historian Carter G. Woodson founded the *Association for the Study of African American Life and History* that same year. A decade later, Woodson began “Negro History Week,” timed to coincide with the birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. In 1976, that week became a full month.

Notably, Woodson's intent was to both address the history of enslavement as well as ongoing contributions of African Americans to society. If you have visited the Smithsonian's *National Museum of African American History and Culture* in D.C., you will encounter a similar experience. While the museum begins in the difficult and traumatic history of enslavement and resistance, the multi-level exhibits move through time and topic to convey a rich tapestry of Black achievement and impact in U.S. society and culture.

*And* the museum opened less than ten years ago in 2016. There has not always been a broad commitment to publicly telling the fuller truth and a wider narrative of untold stories and contributions by historically marginalized groups. Rather, whose stories are preserved and how they are told remain contested in our nation. From Florida Governor [Ron DeSantis](#) criticizing the College Board's Advanced Placement course on African American Studies to protests over the [renaming](#) of U.S. military bases honoring Confederate leaders, questions about which stories to teach and who to honor are lively and ongoing.

In recent years, more and more old institutions have pursued deeper knowledge of their own intersections with African American lives and history. For example, the Audubon Society has a page on their website exploring [“The Myth of John James Audubon.”](#) who enslaved multiple people throughout his lifetime and expressed white supremacist views. Even as the article names these truths, it also states, *“His paintings of birds and other wildlife were remarkable—full of exacting detail and often exciting drama, both of which make his work so vibrant and valuable.”* Both the exquisite detail of his birds and his racism are true. While Audubon was not alone in his attitudes in his antebellum era, critics of the institution of slavery were very much part of his era as well. Indeed, slavery was ruled unconstitutional in Massachusetts by 1783. And in 1820, the Missouri Compromise

reflected divisive attitudes in the nation regarding the institution of slavery. Thus, when Audubon published *Birds of America* between 1827 and 1838, he did so within a context of ample anti-slavery sentiment.

I truly admire the tremendous beauty in Audubon's watercolors of birds. I also respect the work of the Audubon Society, founded just down the street in the building we know today as Hale House. In highlighting the life of John James Audubon, I simply wish to illustrate the struggle of telling the fuller story of people whose lives contain elements of admirable achievement *and* of actions we now judge as unjust or immoral—and who may have been so judged by some in their own time as well.

How to remember a life becomes even more complex when the archives of documents and other artifacts are thin or problematic. As we heard earlier in our service, we have incomplete information on the life of Dorcas, the first person of African ancestry to join First Church in Boston as a covenanting member. We know her approximate arrival in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, but not her place of birth. We know she joined the church in Dorchester and was lauded for her Christian faith, but we do not have any records *in her own words* as we do for poet Phillis Wheatly or for Governor John Winthrop. We do know members of the Dorchester church attempted to secure her freedom, but we do not know if they were successful. Nor do we know the details of her presumed marriage to Matthew, father of her children, nor the date of her death or the fate of her husband or son. We know enough to know she was respected and trusted by this congregation, such that they accepted her into their covenantal community, defined by shared faith and a pledge of mutual care. And still, we know so very little of her relative to the man whose larger-than-life monument stands outside our main entrance.

Beyond Dorcas, the First Church in Boston records convey that multiple African Americans were associated with the congregation in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Thanks to the research of several congregants, we have a list of African American persons affiliated with the church through baptism, membership, and marriage. These records are small fragments of data that only hint at larger stories. And yet, sometimes even the brief points of information indicate stories that give us pause. For example, this baptismal record:

“1756. Mar. 21. Phyllis, Dr Chauncy's Negro Woman.”

Dr. Chauncy was Minister of First Church Boston from 1727-1787. Several weeks ago I [preached](#) with admiration about his significant influence challenging the Great Awakening, supporting the Revolutionary War, and publishing an early volume on Universalism. *And* it appears he enslaved a woman named Phyliss. While volumes of Chauncy's thoughts

remain extant to this day, of Phyliss we know this—her first name, her baptismal date, her racial identity, and that she “belonged” to Dr. Chauncey.

While I am not kin to Dr. Chauncey, I am his successor as Minister of this church. I am proud and excited to have become a part of this community and its long history. Earlier this week, I saw my name on the calligraphy memorial to the Ministers of First Church for the first time and my breath caught. So also, many of you are proud to be affiliated with the oldest church in Boston and one of the oldest in the nation. This pride goes back decades, centuries as evidenced in the celebratory sermons and books marking anniversaries. When First Church moved to Back Bay in 1868, the Gothic-styled cathedral included only stained-glass memorial windows, but by 1933 the walls were full of all kinds of memorials, primarily donated by descendants or admirers of the deceased. Indeed, a Memorial Committee was established in 1905 to field the requests. And yet, these memorials were lost in the 1968 destruction of the church by fire. Starting in 1979, calligrapher Margaret Shepherd began to recreate the lost memorials on paper. A reconstituted Memorials Committee has since supported a wider range of calligraphy memorials—including women, more recent figures, and overlooked persons, such as the memorial to Dorcas we dedicate today.

Such efforts to include a wider array of memorials starts to convey a fuller truth about the history of our church. The historic record of this church, like that of any human life, is complex, comprised of noble aspirations as well as very real injustices and harms. How might we continue to engage in the work of naming this fuller, multi-layered narrative? How might we make public our knowledge and/or our effort to learn more of this fuller story? I say “we” because my name as well as many of yours is now part of the historical record of First Church Boston, linking my membership with that of Dorcas and with that of John Winthrop. In other words, membership today is linked to both the enslaved and the enslaver, to white puritans as well as to those of African, Indigenous, and other non-English ancestries.

Beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the presence of Dorcas and others of African and Indigenous ancestry meant that First Church was interracial and multicultural. While members shared an ideal of *spiritual* equality before God, social and legal inequality were nonetheless evident as the practice of enslavement, even by clergy, were present into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I wonder how we might anchor ourselves in the historic ideal of spiritual equality while committing to its expanded social and legal expressions? How might we acknowledge the wider impact our ancestors had—not only what new things they helped to create, but also what damaging, even violent losses they wrought as well?

History does act as a judge as we learn and grow in our experience of living with others, of being ever more faithful to a vision of building communities of mutual love and respect. And so, I wonder how will history judge our choices to respond (or not) to the call to tell a fuller truth, to wrestle with legacies of enslavement, and to make visible the presence and contributions of historically marginalized groups, including African Americans. By remembering Dorcas today and dedicating a Memorial to her, may we have taken one step in this direction of a fuller truth.

May it be so.

Amen

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### **Story and Dedication of Dorcas Memorial**

Rev. Dr. May  
Margaret Shepherd,  
Memorials Committee

Since at least 1639, African Americans have been part of the Boston community. So also, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century the membership of First Church Boston has been interracial. From our church records, we know that the first person of African descent to join the church as a member was Dorcas in 1677.

While much is unknown about Dorcas' life and death, we know that she arrived in Massachusetts Bay prior to 1641, the year she joined the church in Dorchester. It is quite likely that she was one of the enslaved Africans brought to Boston in 1639 aboard the ship *Desire*. This ship had been sent to the Caribbean with seventeen unfree people from the Pequot nation, captives from the violence of the English and their allies against the Pequot. The ship returned with a cargo of goods, among which was listed enslaved people of African ancestry. Although her connection to the ship *Desire* is not definitive, it *is* clear that she was legally enslaved in 1641 to an English member of the church in Dorchester.

To be baptized and join the church in 1641, Dorcas would have needed to first confess her spiritual story of sin and repentance to a group of church leaders, and then to the whole church—a process testing the authenticity of her experience before she would be recognized as a member of the covenanting community. Thus, her acceptance into membership reflects a sense of trust and respect by the English members of the congregation.

Her 1641 baptism and church membership were also noted by Governor John Winthrop, who wrote in his journal of the event, commending Dorcas for her “sound knowledge and true godliness.” Notably, Winthrop only recorded the baptisms of one of his own children, of a child of First Church Boston minister John Cotton, and Dorcas’ baptism.

As a church member, Dorcas was entitled to the baptism of her children. In 1652, the First Church Boston records include a note of the baptism of her son Matthew in Dorchester. A year later, the Dorchester church records tell a remarkable story of the English members of the church voting to support a plan seeking Dorcas’ freedom, at their own shared cost as needed. While we do not have a record of the outcome of these efforts, we do know that her faithfulness as a Christian was known not only here in Massachusetts, but also in England thanks to a puritan publication in London.

We also know that around this same time, in 1654, her daughter Martha died in Boston. Then, more than 20 years later, Dorcas moved her church membership from Dorchester, joining the First Church in Boston in 1677. We do not know when she died. Nor do we know what happened to her son Matthew, or to his father, also named Matthew. Nor do we have a record of her marriage though given puritan morality standards, marriage is likely.

For all we do not know of Dorcas’ story or her inner life, her decades-long affiliation with two churches is abundantly clear. In her lifetime she had the trust and admiration of the members of both churches. By installing a Memorial to Dorcas here at First Church Boston we restore her to a place of respect and honor.

*To tell us more about the First Church Boston Memorial Project and the creation of this memorial to Dorcas, I invite artist Margaret Shepherd to say a few words:*

“Nearly 50 years ago, in late 1978, Standing Committee chairman George Richardson approached me about lettering replacements for the dozens of stone, wood, stained glass, and metal memorials lost in the 1968 fire. All we had to go on was an old booklet with a record of the texts and a few photographs of the plaques. I lettered about half of the memorials in time for 1980, the 450th anniversary year of both First Church and the city of Boston. The Athenaeum exhibited them to show how our founders were Boston’s founders.

Unlike this lucky survival of the texts for our historic memorials, two years ago we had only a short Wiki article and the briefest historical notes about Dorcas, the first African American member of First Church. Cathy and Mary Collins, and Doug Miller, pieced together a memorial from these lucky finds and recent research about this remarkable woman. While they edited the wording into a coherent narrative, I made dozens of small

sketches to help me visualize her character. I settled on her name in the simplest block letters over a rectangular paragraph, with a change of letter color about 2/3 of the way to the right, alluding to the unusual shift in her status and her response to it. I did not divide the colors with a line, but let her birth and death dates hint at it from top and bottom. I also added depth using soft, multi-color pastel strokes between the lines of blue lettering. I like to reward the viewer who spends extra time looking at calligraphy.

It was a pleasure and a privilege for me to work with this text, and to add this remarkable woman to the 71 memorials already on our walls.”

*As I prepare to formally dedicate this Memorial to Dorcas, I invite you to stand in body or in spirit as a symbol of respect...*

On behalf of the congregation of First Church Boston, I dedicate this Memorial to Dorcas, the first person of African ancestry to be a member of this church. May its presence remind us of Dorcas’ life and of her contributions to this congregation. May her story testify to a larger narrative of who has belonged to and helped to shape this congregation over its long history—including persons who have been enslaved, and persons with diverse racial and ethnic ancestry. So may this Memorial to Dorcas not only honor the life and faith of a woman who once lived and worshipped as part of this congregation, may it also be a further step towards remembering and telling a wider history of the First Church in Boston.