

“A Legacy of Love or Hate?”

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First Church in Boston

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In October 1856, the Rev. Rufus Ellis was in his fourth year as minister of First Church when he preached about the immorality of enslaving people. We don't have the sermon, but we do have a note from a disgruntled congregant and Ellis' response. (below and [Memoir](#), 158)

The congregant told Ellis that the topic of enslaving people “may engender feelings leading to strife and bitterness.”

Indeed, in 1856, the topic of enslaving people was **very** divisive. Just six years before, Congress had passed the [Fugitive Slave Act](#) to strengthen the ability of enslavers to recapture freedom seekers who had fled North. Local and state authorities were compelled to assist “slave catchers” seeking to detain and deport freedom seekers. Additionally, *any* member of the public could be fined or imprisoned if they “[knowingly and willingly obstruct, hinder, or prevent](#)” efforts to capture freedom seekers. If a freedom seeker was arrested, they faced a single federal magistrate, not a jury, who determined whether to return them to their enslaver. Furthermore, these magistrates were paid ten dollars to send people back, but only five dollars if they let them stay free.

This didn't sit well with folks in Boston and other northern cities. [In Boston](#), there was an increase in support for the Underground Railroad as well as mass organizing to resist the return of freedom seekers such as Ellen and William Craft, Shadrack Minkins, and Anthony Burns.

Burns was just 20 years old when he was arrested on May 24, 1854. When news of his imprisonment at the Courthouse jail spread, abolitionists, including African American Lewis Hayden and white Unitarian ministers Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Theodore Parker, called for a [meeting at Faneuil Hall on May 26](#) to plan a rescue. However, the rescue attempt at the courthouse turned violent. An [article on the Revolutionary Spaces](#) website describes, “After a night of violence, one man was dead, several were arrested, and Burns was still in jail.”

President Franklin Peirce approved the use of federal troops to hold Burns under heavy guard during his trial. After his conviction on June 2, Burns was marched to a federal ship in the harbor [under guard of hundreds of Marines and soldiers](#). Every street along the road was lined with protestors—some estimates record a staggering 50,000 people.

Burns forceable return to enslavement galvanized the Commonwealth. By the next year, Massachusetts had one of the strictest [Personal Liberty Acts](#), which effectively made seizing

freedom seekers too difficult and costly to pursue. In Boston, Burns' trial would be the last under the Fugitive Slave Act.

As for Burns, his Boston minister, the Rev. Leonard Grimes of Twelfth Baptist, [arranged to pay for Burns' freedom](#). After some time back in Boston, Burns became a student at Oberlin College in Ohio before becoming a minister. Sadly, Burns died young from tuberculosis at age 28. At the cemetery where he is buried in Ontario, an official plaque tells Burns story.

While studying at Oberlin, Burns learned that his former church in Virginia excommunicated him for the sin of seeking his freedom. In response, [Burns wrote](#),

“That man-stealer who stole me trampled on my dearest rights. He committed an outrage on the law of God ... God made me a *man* – not a *slave*.”

For Anthony Burns and for Rufus Ellis, enslaving people was a *moral* issue denounced by their God.

According to the Oct 31 letter we heard read today, Rev. Ellis made it clear from day one where he stood on the morality of enslavement. And yet, Ellis is also careful to distinguish himself as “neither fanatic nor political partisan.” In other words, he was not a radical like the Rev. Thomas Wentworth Higginson who held a battering ram to break down the courthouse door in the effort to free Anthony Burns.

By also clarifying he was not a political partisan, Ellis is likely referring to the 1856 presidential election which would be held in less than a week on November 4. In short, the 1856 election was a very contentious referendum on the expansion and federal protection of enslavement. Ellis may not have told folks who to vote for, but his choice to preach on the morality of enslavement so close to the election undoubtedly was not happenstance.

Remarkably, Ellis both unapologetically defends preaching against the immorality of stealing people's freedom *and* self-identified his sermon as “conservative.” For First Church in Boston, however, even a conservative anti-slavery sermon was a significant departure from precedent.

Ellis' predecessor, the Rev. Nathaniel Frothingham proudly avoided partisan conflict—even navigating First Church through the “Unitarian Controversy” with an aim to avoid the “*schism*”, writing,

“*We have loved to dwell within ourselves, and disliked to implicate our concerns with those of other churches, or with any associations of men.*”

From what I have read, it seems that Frothingham likewise did not wade into the controversy of enslavement. Nor, as I [mentioned in December](#), did the church leaders

support the use of the building for anti-slavery efforts in the 1830's during Frothingham's ministry.

And before Frothingham? In the years before the Revolution, the long-time minister Charles Chauncy enslaved a woman named Phyllis. We know about Phyllis because the church records include a record of her baptism on March 21, 1756, describing her as "Dr. Chauncy's Negro Woman." While I have not found records indicating that the Rev. Benjamin Wadsworth enslaved people while serving as minister of First Church, we do know that Wadsworth enslaved two people, Titus and Venus, when he became president of Harvard. So also, we know that Increase and Cotton Mather, both ministers of Second Church, were enslavers.

In his letter, Ellis notes that in his opening sermon here he conveyed his intention to address "*every great moral subject, every evil and sin, including that of slavery.*" Likewise, in my [first sermon](#) as minister here, I preached about the enslavement of indigenous peoples following the Pequot War in 1636 as well as Governor John Winthrop's role in the arrival of enslaved Africans in Boston in 1638. Thus, Winthrop, whose bronze statue resides at the foot of our doors today, is both a key founder of this church *and* a documented enslaver.

As a congregation, First Church in Boston has long been proud of its history. It is fairly easy to find commemorative books and sermons for the various anniversaries over our nearly 400-year history. Across the back of this sanctuary, we have a wall of memorials to people with connections to this congregation or to one of the congregations that merged into the church. Most recently, we added a memorial to Dorcas, the first person of African ancestry to appear in our church record books.

Still, I cannot help but wonder if we are doing enough to tell the fuller history of First Church, of Second Church, of Hollis, South, and the other three churches who comprise our combined history through mergers. I wonder if we have done enough to tell the Black History that is part of our histories? The stories of Black baptisms and marriages, yes, but also the stories of enslavers and of wealth built by Northern investment in the businesses sustained by enslavement?

This is about the past, but it is also about our present. Understanding the past teaches us something about the questions we face today. Consider, for example, a January 30th *New Yorker* article by Jelani Cobb entitled, "[What ICE Should Have Learned from the Fugitive Slave Act.](#)" While acknowledging that attitudes towards enslavement in the North could be complicated, Cobb writes that the Fugitive Slave Act raised a new question:

“Were Northerners prepared to watch their neighbors, many of whom had lived in their communities for years, be violently removed from their homes or grabbed off the streets?”

Rather than suppress the tension between North and South, the Fugitive Slave Act turned a political question into a personal one. In his book about the Act, historian [Andrew Delbanco](#) notes,

“Even free black people in the North—including those who had never been enslaved—found their lives infused with the terror of being seized and deported on the pretext that they had once belonged to someone in the South.” (Quoted in Cobb, “What ICE”)

By noticing these parallels of past and present, my mind travels in multiple directions. I wonder how history will write about this moment—about the people who resisted, about the role of churches and ministers? And I am also struck by how much history rhymes if not precisely repeating.

This moment is *not* the same as 1856 when Rev. Ellis and his congregant disagreed. And racism with its ugly, demeaning hatred towards people of African descent remains very much alive today. To denounce the immorality of enslaving people, Ellis leaned into his understanding of the Christian gospel. Today I point to our Unitarian Universalist value of Love that insists upon the inherent worthiness of each person—without exception for racial or ethnic identity, nor for immigration or citizenship status.

In this moment, we are still dealing with the legacies of hatred and racism within our culture, our institutions, and, for many of us, within our own minds and hearts as well. It can be easy to nod along in a liberal church like ours to another sermon in Black History month on the importance of engaging in anti-racism. I hope this sermon is more than that for you and for me.

One reason I came to *this* historic church is because I *love* history. I love being part of this founding church of Boston who has born witness to colonial experiments and Revolutionary War, to industrialization and gay marriage. I love that the worshipping community shows resilience across centuries of change—including the bold decision to design this building as a resource for the wider community after the 1968 fire.

And my love of history, this church, and our UU faith, also leads me to examine the racism and violence in our history as one way to move towards a more just and accountable society. So, I *am* going to keep preaching about the need to tell a *fuller* history of First Church. I *am* going to keep telling some of these stories in sermons. And I *am* hoping that we can find concrete ways to publicly tell our fuller story on our website as well as in our

signage inside and outside the building. This is not work for me alone—this is work for *us*, the people of this church to do together.

As the abolitionist movement began to build in Boston, Rev. Frothingham remained silent and the doors remained closed to the movement. When Rev. Ellis chose to speak out about the immorality of enslaving people, he faced some resistance. As with generations before us, we continue to face moral questions—including the question of whose stories we tell and whether we publicly acknowledge the harm and injustices this church has caused as well as the “firsts” and the “famous.”

There *is* a lot happening in our city and nation right now that demands our moral attention. We each are called to consider how to resist the evils of hatred and racism as we seek to Love. We may not all respond in the same way, but I hope each of us finds a way to help leave a legacy of love not hate. That is a moral charge for any age.

May it be so. Amen. Ashe.