

Sankofa

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How many times have people just told you to “get over it”? Well the concept of Sankofa derived from the King of Adinkera of the Akan people of West Africa will have none of that. SANKOFA literally translated means it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot. SANKOFA does not instruct us to “just get over it.” Visually and symbolically, SANKOFA is expressed as a mythical bird that flies forward while looking backward with an egg in its mouth. The egg symbolizes the future.

The bird reminds us that we must continue to move forward as we remember our past. And at the same time, we plant a seed for the future generations that come after us.

Today is a day for us to remember and commemorate the enslavement of 12.5 million enslaved men and women boys and girls who were brought to these shores starting in 1619 and sold into one of the World’s most barbaric system of chattel slavery. Nearly two million people died during the voyage which is referred to as the Middle Passage. Black people suffered brutal abuse and mistreatment. Nearly half of all enslaved people were separated from their children, spouses, parents, or siblings during the domestic slave trade.

The Sankofa bird reminds us to look back signifying that it is not a taboo to fetch what you have forgot. Out of slavery grew almost everything that has truly made America exceptional, its economic might, its industrial power, its music, its educational disparities, voter suppression, and its income inequality, its tolerance for violence, its prison industrial complex and the endemic racial fears and hatred that continues to plague us to this day. Lawyer and social activist Bryan Stevenson reminds us that “slavery did not end in 1865 it just evolved.”

The Sankofa bird tells us to look back. Yet, we as a people of faith have forgot to look back. But why? Because it can be painful and uncomfortable to see and learn about the brutality and cruelty we have allowed in this country. However, we ignore it at our peril.

So, we lift one of God’s daughters’ who dwelled among us at Old South. We lift the life and work of Phillis Wheatly not simply to rehearse history but to repair history. In the retelling of this narrative we lift a story of survival, determination, resilience, and hope from the difficulty of our past. Her story along with the stories of countless other enslaved people is one of endurance, strength and hope.

As people of faith, God has afforded us this day as a time to look back so we can fly forward with a hope that is rooted not in a passive assumption that the future belongs easily to God. Rather a hope that is serious and rooted and sustained in the future that is willed and shaped by God. A hope that is not rooted on a failed past but a hope that is possible because God of the Gospel is not and will never be domesticated into old patterns of unjust social relationships.

To God be the glory for HOPE.

Brian Stevenson, quote is from a CNN Interview with Emma Seslowsky, December 7, 2018- The Axe Files

Sankofa (1619) a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister, on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the first Africans to arrive on these shores, based on Exodus 3.1-7

Kenyan proverb:

*Until lions start writing their own stories,
the hunters will always be the heroes.*

Over the course of recent decades, United Church of Christ historians have tried to change that, at least for the UCC. In a project called “Hidden Histories” they have uncovered stories in our denomination’s life featuring under-represented groups: Armenians, Hungarians, women, Japanese-Americans, Native Americans, and African Americans.

The Hidden Histories project has given visibility to the formerly invisible, and given voice the voiceless.

Similarly, the New York Times, launched a stunning series of new obituaries called: “Overlooked No More” ... obituaries of persons, many of them long gone, whose stories never appeared in the Times. As the New York Times confessed, since 1851 the vast majority of their obituaries featured white men. I wept to read the story of Georgia Gilmore, a poor, black woman who fed and funded the Montgomery bus boycott. I wept to read the story of Ralph Lazo, a Mexican American, who voluntarily lived in a Japanese Internment Camp in a spectacular act of solidarity.

In recent years, biblical scholars have undertaken a similar project: to uncover hidden histories in the Bible...specifically histories and stories of people of color, African people.

Did you know that Ethiopia is named forty-five times in the Bible?

Did you know that Africa is mentioned more than any other land mass?

Did you know that in Genesis the first man is named Adam, and that the Hebrew word, Adam, means “reddish-brown”. It is the color of the dark, rich, clay soil from which the man was formed. Which means, he wasn’t made white

Did you know that the Garden of Eden is described as located near a four-rivers system in the region of the ancient lands of Cush, Havilah, and Asshure. Today this location is at the confluence of the borders of Ethiopia, Eastern Sudan, and Eritrea.

Did you know that in the *Song of Solomon*, in the first chapter, the fifth verse, the bride sings: "I am black and beautiful"?

People of African descent can claim deep roots in the Bible. Our Bible is populated with African ancestors.

Not a few biblical patriarchs married or had children with women from African tribes

Abraham had children with Hagar and Keturah, both from African tribes.

Moses' wife was Cushite. There was bitter jealousy between Moses' black wife and white sister. It is not a little ironic that Moses' white sister, who resented her black sister-in-law, is struck white with leprosy.

Did you know that when Israelites settled in the land of Canaan, there were Africans among them?

The New Testament features the story of an Ethiopian who converts to Christianity. This is not just any Ethiopian. He is treasurer to the Queen of Nubia.

The New Testament also tells the story of Simon of Cyrene. Ancient Cyrene would be today's Libya, in North Africa. Simon of Cyrene, also known as Simon the Black, was forced to carry Christ's cross on the way to Golgotha. In time, Simon became a convert to Christianity and brought the faith to Cyrene.

Much of this biblical blackness was all but invisible to white Western Christianity until – are you ready for this, Old South Church? – until, Phillis Wheatley made the invisible visible; and until single handedly, through her poetry, rendered the invisible visible. She revealed and she claimed the Bible's African roots.

Phillis, the lion, the hunted, read her Bible carefully, cover to cover. She noted every reference to Ethiopia and Cush, Cyrene and Niger. She marked every mention of Africa; every notation of skin color – ruddy Adam, a bride black and beautiful; a jealous Miriam turning white with leprosy; a celebrated Ethiopian, treasurer to the Queen of Nubia.

And Phillis started writing, started telling her own story. In her poetry, she describes herself as Ethiopian, an identity by which she claims for herself biblical authority. She names herself "Africa's muse" and, describes her skin color as a sable. Sable. I researched this: during Phillis Wheatley's life-time, sable was the among the rarest and most sought after furs.

Phillis Wheatley refuses to admit of the labels imposed on her. She refuses to participate in the shaming of her race. She will not admit to the labels Negro or slave. No, she asserts, she is Ethiopian. Or she is African. And her skin? An exotic sable!

There is more. The young poet lioness, the hunted, looks upon the white people around her, and again she reaches deep into her Bible, their Bible, our Bible. With biblical precision, she gives them an epithet befitting their actions. She calls the white people of her day, “modern Egyptians”.

With that deft stroke of her pen, she exposes their willingness to tolerate, participate in, and benefit from the institution of slavery. An institution, our Bible says, which God loathes.

Phillis Wheatley – stolen from Africa; as a child torn from her parent’s arms, ensnared in the unbearable cruelty of the Middle Passage, enslaved, sold, bought – by her wit and quill becomes the hunter. She flips the script and writes her story, wherein she is the hero.

Kenyan proverb:

*Until lions start writing their own stories,
the hunters will always be the heroes.*

Today, on this 400th Anniversary of the arrival of the first Africans to these shores, we can add this warning:

Once the hunted start writing their own stories, O, hunters, beware:

*The tide is turned.
The script is flipped.
The lost are found.
The last are first.
The captives released.
And the lowly lifted up.*

*Then and only then,
shall justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like a mighty stream.*