

Church of the Holy Cross
July 1, 2012
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“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Our founding fathers wrote these lines in response to a sense of call, an overwhelming conviction that they had been chosen and uniquely gifted to found on this continent a new kind of government and society. Although they intentionally remained neutral toward religions in the foundational documents of the United States, Christian ideals and the notion of call were inherent in their words. But they were human, and fallible, and to reach agreement they were forced to compromise on some contentious issues.

And so the “more perfect union” they built on the cornerstone of the Declaration of Independence failed to meet all the ideals it espoused. The early years of our great political experiment were marred by the “peculiar institution” of chattel slavery, a system enshrined in our original Constitution, a system in which a slave counted as only three-fifths of a free person for political census purposes. Although the international trade in slaves was illegal under US law in 1807, by 1860 the US economy depended in part on the forced labor of 4 million people—overwhelmingly the descendants of Africans kidnapped from their homeland and traded to the New World—4 million people born into servitude, held involuntarily, and treated as inherently subhuman by even the most “enlightened” of slaveowners. It was a system that could not stand.

Indeed, 150 years ago, our beloved country found itself enmeshed in a civil war, a conflict that set state against state, that divided families, that left much of the world watching to see if our union would tear itself apart—a conflict triggered in large part by the dispute over the future of slavery.

Our church calendar denotes July 1 as a day to recognize and honor a “writer and prophetic witness,” a woman whose faith and passion called her to play a key role in that underlying dispute. You probably remember Harriet Beecher Stowe as the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. You may have heard the story—almost certainly apocryphal—that President Lincoln, upon meeting her, said, “So you’re the little woman who started this great war.” But I knew little more than that until, curious about her presence on the church calendar, I began to explore her biography and to reread her novel for the first time since I was a literature major in college.

Harriet Beecher was born into a religious family in Connecticut in 1811. Her father was a noted minister, and seven of her brothers became clergymen. Unlikely many women of that era, Harriet received a typically “male” education in the classics at an academy run by an older sister. In 1832 Harriet and some of her siblings moved to Cincinnati with their father when he became the first President of Lane Theological Seminary, a forward outpost of the Presbyterian Church in what was then still near the leading edge of westward expansion. It appears to be there—in a border state—that Harriet first felt called to become involved in the cause of abolition. And it was

there in 1836 that she married Calvin Ellis Stowe, a widowed professor of sacred literature at the seminary and an ardent abolitionist.

In 1850 Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, a law aimed at preventing slaves from fleeing the South for sanctuary and freedom in the North—a law that abolitionists first opposed and then defied. As a woman in that era, Harriet could have no direct effect on public policy: she couldn't run for office, couldn't lead a petition drive, couldn't even vote. But she had a good mind, that classical education, and a gift for words—talents she applied to the service of her call. On March 9, 1850, in reaction to the Fugitive Slave Act, she wrote to the editor of *National Era*, a weekly antislavery journal, that she planned to write a story about the problem of slavery. And we hear her use the language of call: "I feel now that the time is come when even a woman or a child who can speak a word for freedom and humanity is bound to speak... I hope every woman who can write will not be silent."

That story became *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, first serialized in *National Era* and later an immediate bestseller (to use today's terminology) that won tens of thousands to the abolitionist cause, led Stowe to that visit to the White House, and made her reviled throughout the South. (Harriet herself was vague about her meeting with President Lincoln, telling her husband in a letter home only that it was "a really funny interview.")

Although more than just a work of propaganda it has sometimes been labeled, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not a great literary achievement on a par with the best American novels of that period. But it is the fruit of Stowe's gifts and labor, of her faith and passionate belief in freedom for all. She went beyond just writing, too; she and her husband, the parents of seven children, supported the Underground Railroad in deed as well as word, sheltering runaway slaves in their home.

Harriet lived to see Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, the end of the Civil War, the recovery of the Union, and the adoption of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution. She died on July 1, 1896, at age 85.

We all know that even now, as we mark the 150th anniversary of Civil War events, racism and other forms of discrimination continue to poison relations among our citizens. Jesus calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Harriet Beecher Stowe stands as a powerful model of a woman who answered that call, who saw all people as her neighbors, who applied her talents to creating a country that better reflected the ideals of the Declaration of Independence. We are not there yet. What are we doing to continue her work, to answer the call?

I want to close with the prayer appointed for the church's recognition of Harriet Beecher Stowe; let us pray:

PRAYER (traditional language)

Gracious God, we offer thanks for the witness of Harriett Beecher Stowe, whose fiction inspired thousands with compassion for the shame and sufferings of enslaved peoples, and who enriched her writings with the cadences of The Book of Common Prayer. Help us, like her, to strive for thy justice, that our eyes may see the

glory of thy Son, Jesus Christ, when he comes to reign with thee and the Holy Spirit in reconciliation and peace, one God, now and always. Amen.

PRAYER (contemporary language)

Gracious God, we thank you for the witness of Harriett Beecher Stowe, whose fiction inspired thousands with compassion for the shame and sufferings of enslaved peoples, and who enriched her writings with the cadences of The Book of Common Prayer. Help us, like her, to strive for your justice, that our eyes may see the glory of your Son, Jesus Christ, when he comes to reign with you and the Holy Spirit in reconciliation and peace, one God, now and always. Amen.