**“Remember the *Amistad*”**

October 1, 2023 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Texts: Micah 6:6-8; Luke 4:14-30

Reed Baer West Parish of Barnstable

Introduction to Scripture

Our first reading for today is from the prophet Micah, chapter 6.

Our second reading is from the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Luke. It is an incident which frames the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, his mission statement, if you will.

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Justice always requires help. This is one of the messages of our Scripture reading today Justice does not happen by itself, justice will not arrive just because it is in the air or because fate will have it so. Justice requires help. And so it was that Jesus was sent to us, “to proclaim release to the captives and to let the oppressed go free.”

Picture, if you will, a warm, breezy night on the Caribbean Sea in the year of our Lord 1839. A fine night for sailing. The beautiful rakish two-masted Spanish schooner *La Amistad* speeds from Havana under a silver moon. At the wheel is captain Ramon Ferrer; the only sounds are those of the bow knifing through the waves, the hiss of foam running under the ship’s counter, the creak of the wheel, the wind in the rigging – and the clanking of the chains securing the ship’s precious cargo – 53 black Africans.

The slave trade is in full swing in 1839. Africans of many cultures and languages are sold to Portuguese slavers in West Africa, then shipped across the long middle passage to Cuba. Some, including a number whom would later sail on the *Amistad*, are members of the Mendi tribe. Chained to the deck under four foot ceilings, forced to lie side by side in filth and breathe fetid air for months on end, fed a slop of rice and water and disciplined with the whip, only the strong and the lucky (if you could call them that) survive the voyage. Many do not.

Robin Miller, in her poem Amistad Overload, imagines the horror. [Robin reads the poem]

Once in Cuba the Mendi are sold at auction. 53 of the Mendi – including four children -- are bought by Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montez for work on their Cuban plantation in Puerto Principe. They are loaded aboard the ironically named *La Amistad*, which, in translation, means The Friendship.

The cruelty and horrors of the middle passage and the slave auction have not killed the Mendi’s spirit or desire for freedom, and three days out of Havana, fed by rumors that their captors are going to eat them for food, the Mendi are determined to act. Their leader, known to the Spanish as Cinque, pleads with the others: If we do nothing, we will be killed! We may as well die trying to be free!” Cinque leads the uprising, and in the struggle the captain and all but two of the Spaniards are killed. Cinque, whose knowledge of sea-going navigation is limited by what he could observe from below-decks on the middle passage from Africa, orders the Spaniards to steer towards the morning sun, to the East, back to Africa. By day the Amistad sails east, but at night the Spaniards trick the Mendi, sailing by the stars north and west. For two long months the ship slowly zigzags northward, until on August 26, 1839, the United States Coast Guard ship Washington boards the ship, arrests Cinque and his crew, and tows the ship into New Haven. There the Mendi are charged with piracy and murder; there, once again the Mendi are placed in chains and marooned in a land where they do not even know the language. There will be, it seems, no justice for the Mendi, for a people who simply want their freedom. For justice always requires help.

But help is at hand. It comes in the form of New England Congregationalists, a people who themselves had fled persecution, who had escaped from tyranny in England, who had fought for their own freedom in the War of Independence. They believe that individual liberty is God’s great gift and intention for all persons. They believe that Christ calls for all people to be free regardless of race or color. Within a week of Amistad’s capture a group known as the Amistad Committee is formed. Their goal is the same as Cinque’s: to free the captives, and ultimately, to end slavery in the United States.

The Committee’s organizers include Simeon Jocelyn, a white congregational minister and the first pastor of a black congregational church in New Haven; Joshua Levitt, a lawyer and Congregational pastor, who edited The Emancipator, the journal of the American Anti-Slavery Society; and Lewis Tappan, an evangelical abolitionist.

The legal battle takes two years to resolve, going all the way to the Supreme Court, which ultimately ruled against President Van Buren and in favor of the Mendi. And still the work of the Amistad Committee is not finished: it then secures the necessary funds to allow the Mendi their dream of freedom, and they are successfully returned to their homeland.

Justice always requires help. The Amistad Committee, out of its faith in Christ, provided that help to the Mendi. But justice, they realize, had not arrived for all, and so five years later they helped form the American Missionary Association, the first anti-slavery mission society in the United States, The A.M.A.’s chief aim included education for those who had suffered injustice, and it founded over 500 schools and colleges through the South after the Civil Wat to educate the newly freed enslaved. The United Church of Christ’s Board for Homeland Ministries was the heir of the A.M.A. and continues to work on behalf of justice and human rights.

These Congregationalists, these defenders of the Mendi, were motivated by their faith and in faith sought to follow the tail blazed by prophets such as Micah and by Jesus Christ.

Micah was a prophet who lived in the 8th century before Christ in a town some 25 miles south-west of Jerusalem. Micah was understood to bring the word of God to his countrymen, a word both of judgement and forgiveness and hope. He rails against the corruption of government and religious leaders, particularly those ruling from the capital city. Farmers are oppressed, their lands expropriated by the rich; women and children, the most vulnerable in the society, are mistreated; those who speak out against injustice are shouted down and told to fall into line; the religious leaders, instead of decrying the way the people have fallen away from their God, like sheep follow the government’s party line and say all is well when all is not, in fact, well at all; even worse, the priests proclaim confidently: “Surely the Lord is with us!”

Micah finds himself compelled to respond to the injustice he witnessed all around. He cannot and will not remain silent in the face of a country and its people who have gone astray from the ethical demands of their God. At great personal risk, he speaks the truth in love, reminding the people of the ancient teachings which they had forgotten or simply ignored: “do justice … love kindness .., walk humbly with your God.”

It is the same with Jesus. Filled by the Spirit of God, he preaches and teaches throughout Galilee, enjoying great success, until, that is, he returns home to his beloved family and friends and hometown. Asked to teach in the synagogue, he can pick any text he wants. Perhaps a word of comfort, perhaps a word of affirmation, perhaps something safe. He loves these folk, doesn’t he? And yet his love of God, and indeed his love for these people, compels him to choose words of challenge. “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (the year of jubilee, when all debts were to be forgiven.) His message is that he has come not to the affluent, not to the comfortable, and not to do “business as usual”. He has come to bring good news to *all*, not just the insiders and those who expected to be rewarded for their faithfulness. No, he has come to bring release to the captive, healing for those excluded from the community, justice for the oppressed. He brings news of the radical inclusiveness of God’s love, and the irony is that those who heard the message were unable to accept it – outraged that God’s love could extend to those they had excluded and marginalized, they themselves are unable to receive it.

In seeking justice for the *Amistad* captives in the face of popular opposition, our Congregationalist forbears were true to the prophetic heritage of Micah and to the ministry which Jesus calls us to. The question for us today is whether *we* will prove true to that heritage and that same ministry. In the words of John Thomas, past General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ, the denomination of which we are a part, and the denomination which is the direct descendant of those faithful and bold Congregationalists long ago, “The question for us is much the same as it was for those who came to the defense of the *Amistad* captives: Do we love Jesus more than the lure of respectability? And are we prepared to demonstrate amazing generosity in support of a church embodying resistance and daring in our generation?”

Let me repeat that: “The question for us is much the same as it was for those who came to the defense of the *Amistad* captives: Do we love Jesus more than the lure of respectability? And are we prepared to demonstrate amazing generosity in support of a church embodying resistance and daring in our generation?”

Thomas talks about the lure of being the church of respectability. We know that the church of respectability looks like. It is a church which more resembles a thermometer, reflecting how things are, than a thermostat, working for how things ought to be.

What makes being a church of respectability so dangerous is that the allure is so strong. For we intuit that this is not only the safe way to be church, but that it also will help us grow in numbers, budget, importance and even in the ability to be influential and do greater good in the world. Don’t rock the boat, keep our heads down, stick to our knitting. All we need to do is place our love for this church above the love of Jesus. That’s all. Its not much, is it?

But Jesus reminds us if we truly are to love God with all our heart and body and soul, and our neighbor as our self, then we must walk the path risky of discipleship, a path which may indeed take us away from what society at large would deem safe and respectable, a path which may indeed lead us to confrontations with the rulers, princes and principalities of this world. It is a path which, thanks be to God, the Congregationalists who rose to the defense of the *Amistad* captives did not fear to tread, and which led to freedom for all the captives: for the Mendi, for the abolitionists themselves, and for this nation.

Is it a path we dare to tread? Be swift my soul to answer, be jubilant my feet. Our God *is* marching on. Shall we watch from the sidelines, or, remembering the *Amistad*, join in, and get in step with our God who *is* marching on.

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