

October 31, 2010
1 Peter 2:4-9
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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LIVING STONES

A couple of months ago when we were working on worship plans for the fall and realized that this Sunday would actually be Halloween, we thought maybe we should focus on “ghosts of First Parish Church.” After letting our minds play with that a bit, we were drawn to the root meaning of Halloween, which is All Hallows Eve, the day before All Saint’s Day. So we found ourselves thinking of spirits/ saints of First Parish Church, those who have been part of our heritage of faith in this congregation. Harriet Beecher Stowe and Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, who both played significant roles in the Civil War, were two who quickly came to mind. We’ll start with them today but they will lead us to a ghostly figure who indeed lives more in our shadows these days and whom we want to bring to light.

This fall we have already used the image of stones as representing our stories, which we build stone upon stone as a cairn marking the way for those who come after us. Our scripture reading today continues with that image describing Jesus as the cornerstone of faith and calling us to be living stones who help build up the spiritual household. Harriet and Joshua whose time here overlapped, have been living stones in our midst and they have literal stone markers in our congregation – in pew 23 for Harriet and pew 64 for Joshua – to remind us of their ongoing witness. But when Joshua first came here he would not have been sitting in pew 64. Geoff, why don’t you tell us

about where Joshua would have sat and about his life here at FPC.

Geoff (standing in south balcony): When Harriet and Joshua first met, he would have been sitting in the south balcony, which was set-aside for Bowdoin students. All students were still required to attend services here at that time! Joshua studied Hebrew Literature with Harriet’s husband, Calvin Stowe, in the short time that Calvin taught here. As a student, Joshua had quickly become a part of the life of this church. He made extra money by leading choral groups and playing on the organ. As a distinguished oratory student, he overcame an early stammer to give several addresses from our pulpit and stage. And, of course, he found love here: he met Fannie Adams, the adopted daughter of Rev. George Adams. The two of them were the first couple to ever be married in this sanctuary, since church weddings were not common in their time.

(Mary) Harriet was welcomed into the life of this congregation by her neighbor Phoebe Upham, who quickly became her close friend. An interesting note about Phoebe Upham, especially after last week’s sermon, is that she was advocating regularly with the pastor at that time for the right of women to speak in public. Phoebe graciously invited Harriet and her family to join Phoebe’s family in pew 23. They were both women who had something to say. The whole world came to hear Harriet’s heart felt words against

slavery through her book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the vision for which she said she received while attending a communion service here.

Fewer of us know the writing of Phoebe Upham - to our detriment. She wrote a small tract (*Narrative on Phebe Ann Jacobs*, American Tract Society) that gives witness to another living stone from the mid 1800s who has become mostly a ghost for us today. The woman described in the tract had a significant influence on the congregation at the time, and consequently on our two famous people. Yet most of us don't even know her name. She was Phebe Ann Jacobs. This Phebe arrived here in the early 1800s when the congregation was worshipping in the sanctuary that was on this site prior to this building. When Phebe arrived she would not have been allowed to sit on the main floor or in the student's balcony. She was African-American and blacks had their own designated area in the balcony. Today we'll imagine her sitting in the north balcony.

Phebe Jacobs was born into slavery in Morris County, New Jersey, in 1785. When she was still a child she had a chance encounter with Dartmouth President John Wheelock, who quickly recognized her as an intelligent person with a good heart. He purchased her to be a companion for his daughter Maria. From the perspective of the 21st century Phebe's relationship with the Wheelocks is problematic to say the least. The records are inconclusive about when Phebe actually became a free woman. Some references say President Wheelock bought her freedom at the beginning and others imply she became free later. It is a complex question about a complex time. If Mr. Wheelock had not taken her into his family she might have remained a slave all of her life. In reality, her life became joined with theirs, and she and Maria cared deeply about each other throughout their lives.

Phebe was an easy person for others, black or white, to like because she had a sunny disposition. In fact she was known by many as Happy Phebe. In addition, her absolute integrity won the hearts of all. How she struggled in her own heart with the injustices of slavery is unrevealed, for what we know of her is written by white folk. And she spent almost all her life as one of a very small minority of black people in overwhelmingly white communities.

When Maria married the Rev. Dr. William Allen and he became the president of Bowdoin College, Phebe came with them. Together, Maria and Phebe joined the church. After Mrs. Allen died and Dr. Allen moved away, Phebe chose to stay in Brunswick. Apparently Maria's father, Dr. Wheelock, had left Phebe money in his will, a most unseal gesture, which made it possible for her to have a small house on what was then called the "plains," further down Maine Street toward the bay. For about twenty years she lived there supporting herself by doing washing, ironing, and mending for professors and students at Bowdoin.

Phebe was an active, and over time became a very welcome and important, participant in the life of this congregation. In fact faith was the core of her existence. She was committed to the work of the church and gave 50 cents a month to mission, a significant sum in her circumstances.

Prayer was at the core of Phebe's being. She said she lived alone so "there would be no hindrances to prayer and praise at any time." (*tract*) She prayed for everyone – pastor and people, students and professors. Over the years, people came to view her as a pillar of the church. People of all types sought her out. In fact after she died when members of the church met one another the frequent remark, spoken with great regret, was "We have lost Phebe's prayers." (Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Notes on Uncle Tom's Cabin.*)

When Phebe died everyone came to the funeral to pay honor to this very special woman. Dr. Allen and his daughters traveled great distance to be here. An ex-governor of the state and professors of Bowdoin served as pallbearers. A long procession accompanied the casket down Bath Road to Pine Grove cemetery where she is buried next to Maria.

Phebe's story is powerful in and of itself. Yet it is also significant in the way it influenced the development of a story of fiction that sought to tell the truth of slavery.

Phebe Jacobs died just three months before Harriet Beecher Stowe arrived in Brunswick. Their common friend Phoebe Upham introduced Harriet to Phebe Jacobs through the tract that Phoebe Upham wrote to give testimony to the faith and service of Phebe Jacobs.

In her book, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet tells of a time she overheard some young people in Brunswick conversing about the tract on Phebe Jacobs. They were saying it didn't give exactly the right idea of Phebe. Harriet inquired if it spoke too highly of her. "Oh, no, no, indeed," was the earnest response, "it doesn't begin to give an idea of how good she was." (25)

For some time Harriet had been struggling to write something special for the abolitionist movement. She had come to believe it was important to appeal to the heart of the American people, not just their minds, to convince them that slavery was wrong. One of the places she found that heart was in the story of Phebe Jacobs.

Phebe Jacobs became a cornerstone on which Harriet built the character of Uncle Tom. When she was later questioned about the truthfulness of Uncle Tom's depiction, Harriet spoke of religious tracts that give witness to "instances of extraordinary piety among (black people.)" Harriet's friend Phoebe Upham had given her just such a tract, witnessing to the extraordinary piety of Phebe Jacobs.

We don't have such direct evidence of Phebe's influence on Joshua, but Geoff how do you suppose Phebe might have influenced Joshua Chamberlain?

(*Geoff*)

I suspect when Joshua attended some of Harriet's public readings of the installments of her book right here in Brunswick, it must have resonated with him in the woman, Phebe Jacobs, whom he had seen each Sunday in church.

From north to south gallery, Phebe's life in this church had been a testimony of a faithful life. Nowhere in the official history do we hear what Phebe thought of the injustices of her world: her seat in the sanctuary—which was not one of habit but of requirement, the

plight of lost family and friends in slavery. We are led to believe she uttered not a word about this. Yet her faith, her life, her engagement in this church met Joshua face to face each Sunday. This life was a foundation on which Joshua could build a faithful mind that through the course of the war which was to follow would be changed... alongside the country which it raged within.

Joshua spoke directly to that change within the heart of the country: "We did not go into that fight to strike at slavery directly; we were not thinking to solve that problem, but God, in his providence, in His justice, in his mercy, in his great covenant with our fathers, set slavery in the forefront, and it was swept aside as with a whirlwind, when the mighty pageant of the people passed on to its triumph." "Slavery and freedom cannot live together." (Trulock, *Hands of Providence*, 303)

(Mary)

In our journey of "Telling Our Stories" this year, sometimes it is important to simply let the stories speak, and to bring to light the stories of those who have been residing in the shadows. Today we let the living stones of long ago speak to us in the dialogue of faith. For if we were silent the very stones would cry out in witness to God's work in the world. But let us not be silent. Know that we too are called to be living stones building up the household of faith.

