

At 3 pm on Sunday August 25, King's Chapel and the UU Urban Ministry joined ourselves in spirit by the sound of bells, ringing.

As the bell here in historic King's Chapel rang, so, too, did the bell ring at First Church Roxbury, our flagship historic building.

They rang for four minutes.

Our bells, both forged in the foundry named for freedom runner Paul Revere, rang in harmony with bells across the nation – a harmony marking a horror: the day 400 years ago that enslaved Africans were first brought to these shores.

The Africans – 20 to 30 of them – landed in Port Comfort, Virginia. They were purchased by the Jamestown colonists from British pirates.

It was 13 years before First Church in Roxbury – one of the earliest Puritan gathering sites – was founded in what we now call John Eliot Square, the site the UU Urban Ministry now inhabits.

The national bell ringing was organized by the National Park Service as a day of remembrance and healing.

We wanted to remember, too.

We planned no special events, just this: the sound of the bell tolling above Roxbury – the historic heart of Boston's African American community. Above the site where Native Americans once dwelled. The place Puritans gathered in 1631 and worshipped, and where the Rev. John Eliot came to convert the Natives to Christianity and translated the Bible into their native language of Algonquin.

The bell rang above the town called America's first suburb –where affluent Bostonians repaired for the season, and where the Revolution began.

This was where the patriot troops watched the British during the siege of Boston – when men promised their lives in exchange for a nation in which All Were Created Equal.

This was the place where William Dawes began a ride parallel to Paul Revere's to warn that the British were coming.

The bell on this otherwise quiet Sunday rang above the land where the Jewish immigrants came and then the Irish, and then the African Americans.

The bell marked 400 years since our nation began its deal with the devil. Slavery in exchange for prosperity.

The writer Nicole Hannah-Jones in an article for the New York Times 1619 project, described slavery simply and starkly:

“Enslaved people could not legally marry. They were barred from learning to read and restricted from meeting privately in groups. They had no claim to their own children, who could be bought, sold and traded away from them on auction blocks alongside furniture and cattle or behind storefronts that advertised “Negroes for Sale.” Enslavers and the courts did not honor kinship ties to mothers, siblings, cousins. In most courts, they had no legal standing. Enslavers could rape or murder their property without legal consequence. Enslaved people could own nothing, will nothing and inherit nothing. They were legally tortured, including by those working for (Thomas) Jefferson himself. They could be worked to death, and often were, in order to produce the highest profits for the white people who owned them.”

Our bell rang on August 25.

There were no words, because what words could there be?

A small group gathered on our grounds to listen. Black, white, silent.

One of our staff members, who is African American, came to listen with them.

After, one man, white, approached.

I'm sorry, he said.

I'm sorry.

Thank you, she said.

I know it was not your fault. Yours, personally.

We are all a part of this story, she told him. And we have to figure it out together.

The tolling bell was a reminder.

A place to begin.

Much of the work of the UU Urban Ministry happens on this historic spot. Have you been there?

The Urban Ministry has operated in Boston for 190 years, and for the past several decades focused its work in Roxbury. We are grounded in Unitarian Universalist values and sustained through the support of 50 member congregations, like King's Chapel, around Greater Boston. Our Renewal House domestic violence shelter operates nearby. There, we provide material and spiritual support for survivors fleeing abuse.

On our John Eliot Square campus, we offer a workforce development program for survivors. Workforce programs abound in Boston, but ours is unique. In addition to cultivating professional skills, we offer meditation, yoga, art and reflection.

We provide high school students of color a wider path to their dreams, through our afterschool program, offering tutoring, college visits and help with college applications.

And we live into the place we inhabit – the historic heart of Roxbury, atop a hill offering a stunning view of the shimmering office buildings in downtown Boston.

The Urban Ministry inherited this campus in 1976 from the First Church in Roxbury congregation, which had worshipped there since 1632.

Once robust and wealthy, membership had dwindled. White flight from the city to suburbs hollowed out the congregation, leaving a handful who lived outside what had become the heart of the African American community.

It was a story that was repeated in cities across the country: as urban neighborhoods became home to immigrants and migrating African Americans, and as racist business practices like redlining and mortgage discrimination dragged on those minority neighborhoods, as white families feared losing their property values and feared too who was moving in, they moved to the suburbs.

And home-ownership and therefore wealth creation was kept out of the hands of black families.

Finally, the congregation that had worshipped on this spot for more than 300 years folded, and gave its property to the Urban Ministry.

The property included abundant greenspace, and two historic buildings: the fifth Meetinghouse on the site, built in 1804 and now the city's oldest surviving wood frame church, and a parish hall called Putnam Chapel.

This is our location: centered in Roxbury, made up of member congregations in affluent, mostly white suburbs.

We are in a neighborhood where the average lifespan is 59 – 30 years less than in Back Bay, just a mile away. In a city where the average household median net worth for white families is \$247,000, and for black families it is \$8. We are within a school district in which even the high school valedictorians – who are black and brown skinned - struggle to just graduate college.

When I arrived at the Urban Ministry after 10 year serving the homeless community in Rhode Island, I hadn't expected to be talking about race.

In the homeless community, we served a disproportionate number of people of color, but we spoke of poverty and housing rights – not about race.

I expected the Urban Ministry to be likewise, providing programs for those in need. And that was partly so.

But the heartbeat underneath was harder and bolder: It wasn't a program.

It was a question.

What does it mean to be a white-led organization, encircled by white suburban congregations, and located in the center of a neighborhood shaped by racism and segregation?

How do we mend and repair what has been grievously broken?

What is asked of us?

A place to begin is listening. I began there.

I began with listening to the stories of people of color in Boston denied jobs because of their race. I listened to stories of how aunts and uncles and grandparents, who'd found a path to higher education against all odds, could only find jobs in Boston as elevator operators or cleaners despite advanced degrees.

I began with sitting with a black educator who told how black people are hired by whites to watch their babies- a practice rooted in slavery –but still don't trust them to educate their school age children.

I began with listening to state Rep. Byron Rushing speak of the suburban contractors in the 1970s who dumped their construction debris in vacant Roxbury lots. And how the city ignored it until the piles of trash were set afire.

I began as I walked with a Roxbury-born artist who spoke of the abundance of bronze statues of white men through the city. And wouldn't it nice, she said quietly, to see statues of African Americans, too.

And I began noticing, everywhere, yes.

It began with reading, on the Roxbury neighborhood list serve, a neighbor tell how homeownership had been stolen from his grandfather – and with it his family's opportunity for wealth creation - when Urban Renewal steamrolled the family home in Roxbury. And hearing local folks describe the Urban Renewal of the 1970s as the Negro Removal Plan.

These stories have been searing gifts and weighty blessings – guiding me daily to learn more.

In his essay a *Case for Reparations*, the author Ta-nehisi Coates tell the story of an African American man whose life illustrates the grip of racism from slavery into today.

Clyde Ross was born in Mississippi and migrated to Chicago.

After slavery, his family built a farm – which was taken through unscrupulous business practices that cheated black families, and were enabled by a legal system that did not protect African Americans.

His family was reduced to sharecropping. They then were cheated of goods by the landowner. Clyde was bright, but unable to attend a more challenging school because the bus that took white children there would not take him.

He moved north in the 1940s, and tried to buy a home in the 60s. Whites, through measures such as “restrictive covenants” and violence, kept black families out of their neighborhoods, and FHA rules made it near impossible for black families to secure legitimate loans.

Coates writes:

“The American real-estate industry believed segregation to be a moral principle. As late as 1950, the National Association of Real Estate Boards’ code of ethics warned that “a Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood ... any race or nationality, or any individuals whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values.”

The story of Clyde Ross is the story of race in America: white supremacy did not abate with abolition. It took new and innovative forms, fueled by racial fear and hate.

Nicole Hannah-Jones in the New York Times 1619 project wrote this:

“Despite the guarantees of equality in the 14th Amendment, the Supreme Court’s landmark Plessy v. Ferguson decision in 1896 declared that the racial segregation of black Americans was constitutional. With the blessing of the nation’s highest court and no federal will to vindicate black rights, starting in the late 1800s, Southern states passed a series of laws ... meant to make slavery’s racial caste system permanent by denying black people political power, social equality and basic dignity. They passed literacy tests to keep black people from voting and created all-white primaries for elections.

Black people were prohibited from serving on juries or testifying in court against a white person. South Carolina prohibited white and black textile workers from using the same doors. Oklahoma forced phone companies to segregate phone booths Georgia made it illegal for black and white people to be buried next to one another in the same cemetery.

. In the North, white politicians implemented policies that segregated black people into slum neighborhoods and into inferior all-black schools.” She wrote

The racism that slavery birthed has been a shapeshifter through the centuries – from slavery to voter suppression, from lynchings to segregation, from the plantation to modern mass incarceration.

From north to south. From city to suburb. Through redlining and urban renewal, From Savannah to Chicago to Boston and Roxbury.

In our reading this morning from the book of Jeremiah, we read of the promise of the children of God who have scattered – those who are oppressed will return home. Those who are oppressed will find welcome.

*See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,
among them the blind and the lame,
those with child and those in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.*

⁹ *With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations^[a] I will lead them back,
I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble*

....

¹² *They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and over the young of the flock and the herd;
their life shall become like a watered garden,
and they shall never languish again.*

¹³ *Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old shall be merry.
I will turn their mourning into joy,
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.*

In 2020, with segregated neighborhoods and segregated lives, with inequalities of wealth and health and education, how can we do God's will and play a part in return all people home, and to justice? To the grain and the wine and the oil and the dance?

Last summer, I visited the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, to see an exhibit on mending and repair. It was a brilliant exhibit on the humble and careful work of the repair of clothing, blankets, quilts.

In a climate-controlled gallery, glass cases displayed fabrics like a child's Japanese Kimono, found after the atomic bomb dropped in Hiroshima. It was repaired so carefully that I had to bend over the glass and crane my neck to see the stitches. And there were fabrics with colorful patches, embroidered. Fabrics, ripped and mended. There was an English abolitionist textile, with scenes of the slave trade stitched in.

I thought about the damage to these fabrics, and the hope that arises from witnessing that when you can see the tear, there is something to be done.

“Repair,” one quotation in the gallery read, “is the creative destruction of brokenness.”

At the same time I was visiting the exhibit, Congress was holding long overdue hearings on **reparations**. Ta-nehisi Coates was among those making a case.

In his essay, he wrote this: *“Now we have half-stepped away from our long centuries of despoilment, promising, “Never again.” But still we are haunted. It is as though we have run up a credit-card bill and, having pledged to charge no more, remain befuddled that the balance does not disappear. The effects of that balance, interest accruing daily, are all around us.*

“.... we must imagine a new country. Reparations—by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely. The recovering alcoholic may well have to live with his illness for the rest of his life. But at least he is not living a drunken lie. Reparations beckon us to reject the intoxication of hubris and see America as it is—the work of fallible humans

What I'm talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I'm talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal. Reparations would mean the end of scarfing hot dogs on the Fourth of July while denying the facts of our heritage. Reparations would mean the end of yelling “patriotism” while waving a Confederate flag. Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.”

This national conversation and acknowledgement - like the bells tolling from north to south and east to west - is a powerful remembrance and a call.

But this need to mend and repair cannot only happen out there, on the national stage. It must also happen here, right here, where we are.

What does repair mean right here?

Any seamstress or surgeon knows the first step is carefully examining the gash.

And this is a step I know King's Chapel itself has undertaken in the past year. You have begun examining the gash in your own history – proclaiming not just the proud moments, but also dark moments.

I honor your courage in this work – which Rev. Joy has told me about, with great pride in you.

And this is the work of the UU Urban Ministry at First Church Roxbury, too. And the work of congregations around Greater Boston.

The fact of our Roxbury location – on a prominent, historic campus given over by a white congregation that died by white flight – in a community mired in our city's racist past –is for us both a question, and the beginning of an answer.

Over the past five years we have been working to restore the historic Meetinghouse we inherited, which is iconic and beloved in Roxbury.

Look up Roxbury in Wikipedia and you will see a picture of our Meetinghouse illustrating it. During the arson fires of the 1970s, which saw many buildings in Boston burned to the ground for insurance money, some by firefighters later charged, the African American neighborhood protected First Church. Our UU church.

One story tells of an African American grandmother who sat in the front yard, all night, a rifle in her lap, to guard the Roxbury meetinghouse.

Three years ago, we restored the outside of this elegant structure to its former beauty. We knew that Roxbury deserved a well-kept meetinghouse in its center as much as Lexington or Concord or the Boston Common do.

We began opening our doors wider as a gathering space for Roxbury groups working to reduce wealth disparity, working for environmental justice for communities of color, and fighting displacement caused by gentrification.

We gather church members to invest in Roxbury business and cultural institutions: this Christmas season we gathered church members to do their holiday shopping at an Afrocentric market in Nubian Square.

We've invited members of our congregations to join us for a performance of Black Nativity, and to tour the National Center for Afro American Artists in Roxbury, encouraging them to become members.

Last year we began focusing our afterschool program on cultivating an appreciation for history, especially Roxbury's rich history.

The same stories of Roxbury that are learned in affluent neighborhoods - that it's dangerous and broken – have been inhaled by the children growing up there, too.

We tell another story – of Roxbury's historic and cultural richness, its resilience and beauty.

Young people train as neighborhood tour guides, telling about Marcus Garvey, after whom Marcus Garvey Elder Housing is named, or civil rights activist Melnea Cass, after whom the Boulevard is named.

Every story is one more stitch.

This is a program that King's Chapel has financially supported and helped to make possible.

And we continuing transforming our Meetinghouse - reclaiming it as a center for the community.

We will begin restoring the Meetinghouse interior over the next few years – creating a place of beauty that offers arts and humanities to the neighborhood, and raises up the artistry in Roxbury.

And we will be seeking to tell truths about our own history in this space as we go. We've told the story of the Puritan minister John Eliot, called the Apostle to the Indians. We need, too, to hear the stories of the Native people impacted by his arrival.

We need to hear where in the historic Meetinghouses on that site did enslaved people sit. Did First Church ministers own slaves? Where did the congregation stand on Abolition?

What happened when Roxbury became a community of color? Were people of color welcomed or excluded by the white congregation that gave us this space?

Like you, we need to face our own history, open, unafraid, willing to learn from the past in order to make real change for our future.

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May we keep ringing the bell.

May we keep remembering.

May we keep listening.

May we keep mending.