



UU Women's Federation Sermon Award 2020

Honorable Mention

"Legacies of Resistance"

By Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

Sermon delivered to First Parish of Wayland, MA

January 26, 2020

NOTE: Both the local League of Women Voters and the town Historical Society circulated the service information. The Historical Society brought a display of effects that belonged to Lydia Maria Child. Additionally, a scholar working on a new biography of Lydia Maria Child attended the service. A congregant who is a retired composer wrote two songs about Child which were performed that day as well. While the sermon should be judged by its own merits, I thought you might enjoy knowing that its context. I've done my best to strip it of identifying information. Sadly in doing so it loses some of the context which added weight to its delivery.

“Legacies of Resistance”

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Lydia Maria Child never had the right to vote. And yet, she influenced the direction of the entire nation.

What she did have was a pen, a hard-won education, and a brilliant, creative mind.

She also had the adolescent experience of living in Maine near the Abenaki and Penobscot Indians. An experience that informed her first book, *Hobomok*, in 1824 as well as her 1868 “Appeal for the Indians.” During the 44 years between these books, Maria’s life and that of the nation heaved, twisted, and turned.

As a young woman, Child enjoyed early success with *Hobomok*, *The Juvenile Miscellany*, and *The Frugal Housewife*. And then, she met abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. When she published *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* in 1833, she followed her conscience off a metaphorical cliff.

Her 1833 *Appeal* was simply too radical for most Americans. Not only did she denounce slavery (an increasingly acceptable opinion in the North), she also advocated for the *immediate* end to slavery *and* criticized Northern racism. She writes:

“While we bestow our earnest disapprobation on the system of slavery, let us not flatter ourselves that we are in reality any better than our brethren of the South . . . Our prejudice is even more inveterate than it is at the South. . . . Those who are kind and liberal on all other subjects, unite with the selfish and the proud in their unrelenting efforts to keep the colored population in the lowest state of degradation; and the influence they unconsciously exert over children early infuses into their innocent minds the same strong feelings of contempt.”ⁱ

In other words, condemning slavery does not excuse racist attitudes of inequality, prejudice, or hate . . . nor teaching those same attitudes to one’s kids. For Child, the goal was not only to end slavery, but to also end the prejudices and racist ideas that undergirded the whole system of harsh inequality and injustice.

Despite facing resistance, she wrote her conscience.

Child did live to see the end of the Civil War and President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. When author Lori Kenschaft describes this time in her biography of Child, she writes,

[Northerners] rallied around the goal of emancipation, even if just a few years earlier they had been opposed or indifferent to it. For 35 years Child had lobbied for abolition, and many people now praised her foresightedness. Newspapers vied for her writings and she was considered one of the most influential shapers of Northern public opinion.ⁱⁱ

Over the decades, Child's writings had helped to shape the minds of thousands and the direction of a nation.

Up to a point.

Assumptions of racial inequality and white supremacy remained rampant in society and government policy. When Lincoln was assassinated, President Andrew Johnson enacted a policy of post-war Reconstruction that was lenient to the defeated South. Rather than plantations being broken up into small farms for the formerly enslaved persons as Child advocated, most property returned to their white owners. In short order, the reconstituted southern state governments reinstated an agricultural system that strongly resembled slavery in all but name.

In Congress, the Republican majority fought back against Johnson—hoping to build more opportunities for the formerly enslaved persons. But, when Congress passed a Civil Rights Bill defining African Americans as U.S. citizens in 1866, President Johnson vetoed it. Congress overrode the veto, but the tension between Johnson and the 39th Congress erupted. As Kenschaft writes, "Congress would pass laws over Johnson's veto, but Johnson would refuse to enforce them. His overt sabotage of congressional legislation led to the first impeachment of an American president."ⁱⁱⁱ Many of the impeachment charges surrounded Johnson's dismissal of Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, a leading Republican radical in the prior Lincoln administration. Because the 1867 Tenure of Office Act required the Senate to approve the removal of executive officials, Johnson's dismissal of Stanton signaled blatant disregard for Congressional law. And yet, in the Senate, Johnson would avoid removal by just one vote.

Although not engaged in the political fight in DC to reshape the south from a plantation society to a reimagined multiracial society, Child had lobbed her own best resource into the fight—an edited volume, *The Freedman's Book* (1865). She wanted to not only promote

literacy among the formerly enslaved persons, but to also prepare them for participation as full citizens in the nation. Unlike Johnson and others who would return the South to a system of racial hierarchy and white supremacy, Child imagined a world of equality. All this while living here in the little rural town of Wayland, Massachusetts.

It's complicated, isn't it? In so many ways, Child's writing and editing shaped the nation towards a more just and equitable world. *And* in other ways, her advocacy and ideas failed to reach full fruition. A hundred years after the 1865 *Freedman's Book*, a second Civil Rights movement needed to form and another President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to remove the accretions of racist law and practices. Even with the passage of another fifty-plus years, activists today are still calling us to change all matter of racial injustices and aspects of white supremacy culture. Time passes and still so much work remains.

We cannot ask Lydia Maria Child what issue or issues might merit her pen and her mind today. But her legacy speaks to us. Her legacy of resistance that lasted decades.

In a recent book, scholar-activist Mary Frances Berry argues "History Teaches Us to Resist." In each of Dr. Berry's chapters, she traces the complicated ins and outs of multiple movements for social change. The book traces each example with extraordinary detail of people, organizations, dates, and actions. Each sentence links with the flow of actions from earlier pages. This interlinking complexity is itself illustrative. No changes happen in a flash, nor is there a straight path forward. Social change does not happen without persistent, organized groups of people pressuring for change. This is the core argument of the book. Dr. Berry writes,

It's crucial to recognize that resistance works even if it does not achieve all the movement's goals, and that movements are always necessary, because major change will engender resistance, which must be addressed.^{iv}

I can imagine Lydia Maria Child reading that sentence and nodding her head in agreement—can't you?

By the time Child died in 1880, the 13th Amendment made slavery illegal, the 14th Amendment established the right to due process and equal protection under the law, and the 15th Amendment prohibited denying the right to vote because of race. *And*, women would not receive the right to vote for another forty years, Native Americans would continue to face violence as well as the loss of lands and rights well into the future, and

anti-racism work still requires a persistent, organized movement to change minds and laws.

And so, here we are in 2020 as a president once again faces impeachment and Congress is again deeply divided over core values and visions for our shared society. Here we are while the film *Just Mercy* is playing in theaters—telling its story of mass incarceration and racial injustice. And, here we are after more than 16 million acres burned in Australia . . . another sign of the global devastation wrought by Climate Change. A problem Child would never have imagined.

When I imagined writing a sermon about Lydia Maria Child and Dr. Berry’s idea that history teaches us to resist, I thought I’d be up here railing with prophetic anger. Instead, writing this sermon made me weep. I wept for all the injustices and challenges that remain. But, I also weep to imagine what Maria Child would think about a *woman* minister with a doctorate up here quoting Mary Frances Berry—a *black woman* with a PhD and a law degree who served in multiple Presidents’ administrations?

We live everyday within freedoms of which Child only dreamed.

And so how do we live knowing our freedoms emerge from the dreams and legacies of our ancestors? How do we live knowing that social change is neither guaranteed, nor straightforward?

Perhaps what we need to take from Lydia Maria Child is not simply a celebration of her successes, but also her legacy of persistent resistance.

The closing passage from Kenscraft’s biography of Child reads:

Child was not, however, superhuman. She was subject to depression and despair, and at times she could be outright cranky. Some years she felt as if she had accomplished nothing with her life. Her marriage was often troubled, and she always regretted that she had no children. Two things, however, distinguished her from the many people of her time who are now forgotten. First, she had an inexhaustible faith that liberty and justice are worth fighting for and that they will ultimately prevail. Second, she continuously acted on that faith, in large ways and small, even when she did not know whether her actions would succeed. She did not—like her husband—embrace every enthusiasm that came along, but she did her best within each situation and repeatedly risked failure. After each setback, each disappointment, she nursed her wounds and then tried again.^v

“History teaches us to resist.” In every generation, we each have the choice to risk, to fight for liberty and justice, and to join with others to become a movement for change. We are in a moment that calls out for us to join the movement—for a democracy that respects the rights of all persons to vote, for a society free of white supremacy culture, and for a planet capable of sustaining the life of its plants, animals, oceans, and skies.

In Kenschaft’s biography, my favorite line states, “Even though [Child] remained in Wayland, and rarely ventured even into Boston, she helped form public opinion throughout the North.”

Even though we may remain in ___[our town]___, may we receive this humbling legacy of Lydia Maria Child to join the movements of our time, fighting as we can for life, liberty, and justice.

Amen.

ⁱ Lydia Maria Child, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, quoted in Lori Kenschaft, *Lydia Maria Child: The Quest for Racial Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 45.

ⁱⁱ Kenschaft, p. 95.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kenschaft, p. 96-7.

^{iv} Mary Frances Berry, *History Teaches us to Resist: How Progressive Movements Have Succeeded in Challenging Times*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), p. 2.

^v Kenschaft, p. 113.