

A LAW OF LOVE
By Alden Fossett

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O God, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Good morning. I am very grateful to have been invited to preach here this morning and extend my thanks to Revs. Rita Powell and Kate Elledge for their encouragement and support.

Today, I want to speak about Darby Vassall, who was laid to rest here at Christ Church in the Vassall tomb in 1861, as promised by Catherine Graves, granddaughter of Henry Vassall, in 1843.¹ Darby was born in 1769 to Cuba and Anthony Vassall, Africans enslaved by John Vassall, in the mansion John Vassall built on Brattle Street.² During the first half of the 17th century, “the Vassalls were active in nearly all aspects of English Atlantic colonization.”³ And by the mid-18th century, the Vassalls were a family of wealthy planters who accumulated staggering amounts of wealth through the enslaved African labor that sustained their sugar plantations in Westmoreland Parish, Jamaica. In fact, after slavery was abolished by the British Crown in 1833, the Vassall family claimed £7211 in compensation for the 401 people they had enslaved through the Slave Compensation Act of 1837.⁴ The Vassalls were also a founding family of Christ Church.⁵ Their income, and their investment in this very building, was underwritten by the labor of enslaved Africans.

I tell you this because these historical truths taught me why Darby Vassall is so deserving of our study, care, and attention. Because when we fail to live up to our call to love, as the founders of this Church did, as the founders of this country did, as I do every single day, we can rest assured that God will never fail to love because God is love. When you begin to look, even into the deep darkness of the past, for signs of God, you begin to see a light where before there was only darkness. You begin to see love in our time and out of all linear time.

In 1759, the year CCC was founded, Rev. Henry Caner, then rector of King’s Chapel in Boston, sent a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury in support of the campaign to found Christ Church Cambridge. He said:

I apprehend...a Mission in that place [Cambridge] to be of great consequence to the interest of Christianity in general, as well as to that of the Church of England in particular. The College, my Lord, is placed in that town; it is the only seminary of Learning for this Province. Socinianism, Deism, and other bad principles find too much countenance among us. To prevent these and the

¹ W.C.N., “Darby Vassall,” *The Liberator* (Boston, Massachusetts) Nov. 22, 1861, 4.

² Claire Vanderwood, “Darby Vassall.” Washington Library Digital Encyclopedia.
[https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digital history/digital-encyclopedia/article/darby-vassall](https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digital%20history/digital-encyclopedia/article/darby-vassall).

³ S.D. Smith, *Slavery, Family, and Gentry Capitalism in the British Atlantic: The World of the Lascelles, 1648-1834* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 23.

⁴ “Jamaica Westmoreland 27, Sweet River Pen, including Friendship,” *Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery Database*, accessed October 30, 2021, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/claim/view/22693>

⁵ “Parish Profile,” Christ Church Cambridge, February 2021, 2. <http://ccc.cambridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2021-CCC-Parish-Profile.pdf>

like errors from poisoning the fountain of education, it will undoubtedly be of great service to erect a Church there, agreeable to the desire of many of the inhabitants...⁶

Slavery does not make the list of “bad principles” or “errors” potentially poisoning the fountain of education at Harvard. Harvard was built to educate the wealthy elite: those who would constitute the leaders in the Church, the courts, and the government sat and learned in *these* pews and in *this* place. And they were enabled, by their prestigious education, to practice and institute a kind of law that permitted the institution of slavery.

But it is a different kind of law that Jesus teaches us about today. Not human law, but divine law.

In the Lesson for this week, we heard about how the Saducees responded to Jesus’ teaching in the temple. They had been interrogating Jesus antagonistically on the application of the law, and Mark’s account says that 28 “one of the scribes came near and heard the Saducees disputing with one another.” The Saducees were the elite of the temple, the upper class, and they did not like Jesus’ message. They were more concerned with being right than with the content of Jesus’ teaching. They are the status quo, and they struggle to listen to the Word of God.

But in their midst, a scribe entered a familiar place, the temple, and heard something that caught his attention. It was unrest and disagreement among the ones who made up the priesthood, who claimed their authority from a righteous and holy place, who taught the divine law. And in the arguing Saducees, the scribe recognized something: 28 “seeing that he answered them well,” he then asked a question. Like the scribe, we must recognize Jesus as a force that upsets what we consider normal, fair, and comfortable, and know that when we are called, there will be plenty of noise. The scribe asks Jesus in verse 28 “which commandment is the first of all?”

Jesus answers in verse 29 “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.” This line, from Deuteronomy chapter 6, is the first line of the Jewish prayer called the Shema—in Hebrew, שמע (shema) means “hear.” The Shema is a central part of daily and weekly liturgy, and it is customary to cover one’s eyes to increase concentration while saying it. Hear, O Israel. We must be listening for God to speak to us. Jesus continues, referencing the same passage of Deuteronomy, 30 “you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” 31 The second most important thing, Jesus says, besides loving God, is to love your neighbor as yourself.⁷ 31 “There is no other commandment greater than these,” Jesus concludes. Jesus requires of us love, and most especially that we love God by loving the God in the one who is not us. We cannot love God simply by coming to church every week. Because the people who founded Christ Church were coming to church every week but felt perfectly comfortable with genocide, colonial conquest, slavery—all in the name of God or on God’s behalf. And this is not love. It was not love that led to genocide and slavery in Christ’s name.

But slavery and genocide occurred in Christ’s name, and enabled Isaac Royall Jr. to purchase pews at Christ Church and at King’s Chapel in a time when pews were marketable goods that marked the

⁶ Samuel Francis Batchelder, *Christ Church, Cambridge: Some Account of its History and Present Condition, Especially Prepared for Visitors* (Cambridge, 1893), 8-9.

⁷ Leviticus 19:18.

wealth and status of the owner.⁸ The Royalls were a prominent Tory family who helped found Christ Church. They did not simply own some slaves or draw some income from sugar plantations. The Royalls enslaved 60 Africans at their 500-acre Ten Hill Farm in Medford, the most of any family in Massachusetts, and this does not include the Africans they enslaved in Antigua.⁹ They are directly responsible for irreparable social, political, ecological, spiritual, and legal damage on the island of Antigua through their sugar plantations. In fact, the Antiguan government has requested reparations from Harvard University because the Royall family's exploitation of Antiguan people and land underwrote the teaching of law at Harvard.¹⁰

Human laws will always fail us. And it is Jesus, who came not to abolish God's law but to fulfill it, who is calling us to a law of love which sets us free.¹¹

In the article "Perfecting Slavery," Anthony Paul Farley writes of the "Specters of Slavery," highlighting the visibly invisible duality of the institution—a spectre: somehow both totally present and totally absent. A haunting, Farley says.

Slavery is the rule of law. And slavery is death. The slave perfects itself as a slave when it bows down before its master of its own free will... To wake from slavery is to see that everything must go, every law, every room, every great house, every plantation, all of it, everything. Requests for equality and freedom will always fail. Why? Because the fact of need itself means that the request will fail.¹²

Freedom is freedom, Farley says, and the law is something else. There is a quality of freedom that cannot be legislated, yet human law, especially in the United States, has always included references to freedom and equality while implicitly condoning systemic unfreedom. It is thus fundamentally and forever broken. But God will not allow for slavery to stand because God is Freedom. The enslaved are the testimony, the Christ, the suffering, the spirit of God hovering over the waters, the cry in the wilderness, the ram in the bush. God will make a way out of no way and bring the dead to the land of the living. Our God is one, and the One commands us to love. Today, and every day, Jesus is offering us a new kind of law and a new kind of teaching.

And the scribe replied to Jesus, 32 "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other;'" 33 and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." The scribe does not draw a hierarchical distinction between the passages from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. Loving God and loving one's neighbor are not separate actions—they are two parts of a whole law. It is more important to love God, who lives in every being,

⁸ Erica Jill McAvoy, "To Have and Enjoy": Seating in Boston's Early Anglican Churches, 1686-1732," Master's thesis, (UMass Boston, 2020).

⁹ Linda Matchan, "One House, Two Histories in Medford," *Boston Globe*, Sep. 3, 2013.
<https://royallhouse.org/wpcontent/uploads/2013/10/Article1.pdf>.

¹⁰ Meagan Flynn, "Antigua and Barbuda Want Reparations from Harvard Because of the Law School's Slavery Ties," *Boston Globe*, Nov. 6, 2019.

<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/11/06/antigua-and-barbuda-want-reparations-from-harvard-because-law-school-slavery-ties/JA1j39FdEDBsPbTjPpTarN/story.html>

¹¹ Matthew 5:17.

¹² Anthony Paul Farley, "Perfecting Slavery," *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* 35, no. 1 (Fall 2004): 225-227.

who is the Being beyond all being. And the text says that Jesus tells the scribe that he is not far from the kingdom of God because of his wise answer. And then everyone fell silent.

For the kingdom is very near, and the Word was right in front of them, and Jesus is right in front of us, the announcement of God's coming to dwell on earth and promise to bring justice, and mercy, and peace beyond all comprehension. And we must listen for it. We must listen to hear God speaking to God's people.

Darby Vassall, once enslaved by the Vassall family, Darby, buried beneath our very feet, is the living and active Word in the archive. He allows us to proclaim Christ's true presence in our midst, in a world of death. There is a glimmering hope, a light, and a breath because Darby refused to accept slavery as death. He proclaimed life and lived in love. He was a founding member of the Boston African Society, an organization established in 1796 to provide health insurance, funeral benefits, and spiritual fellowship to free Black people in Boston when the Church and the government failed his community. He loved his neighbor as himself, even though the shape of his life was due to the violation of that very law.

This is Jesus' law—a law of love. And we, who sit here today and inherit the spiritual legacy of slavery in American Christendom, are gathered here in the name of love. May this love, God's perfect love, transform us. Love, thy will be done.

Grant eternal rest to your beloved Darby Vassall, O God, and let light perpetual shine upon him.
Amen.

Bibliography

- Batchelder, Samuel Francis. *Christ Church, Cambridge: Some Account of its History and Present Condition, Especially Prepared for Visitors*. Cambridge, 1893.
- Farley, Anthony Paul. "Perfecting Slavery." *Loyola University Chicago Law Journal* 35, no. 1 (Fall 2004).
- Flynn, Meagan. "Antigua and Barbuda Want Reparations from Harvard Because of the Law School's Slavery Ties." *Boston Globe*, Nov. 6, 2019.
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/11/06/antigua-and-barbuda-want-reparations-from-harvard-because-law-school-slavery-ties/JA1j39FdEDBsPbTjPpTarN/story.html>
- "Jamaica Westmoreland 27, Sweet River Pen, including Friendship." *Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery Database*. Accessed October 30, 2021.
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/claim/view/22693>
- Matchan, Linda. "One House, Two Histories in Medford," *Boston Globe*, Sep. 3, 2013.
<https://royallhouse.org/wpcontent/uploads/2013/10/Article1.pdf>
- McAvoy, Erica Jill. "'To Have and Enjoy': Seating in Boston's Early Anglican Churches, 1686-1732." Master's thesis. UMass Boston, December 2020.
https://scholarworks.umb.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1660&context=masters_theses
- "Parish Profile." Christ Church Cambridge. February 2021. <http://cccambbridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2021-CCC-Parish-Profile.pdf>
- Smith, S.D. *Slavery, Family, and Gentry Capitalism in the British Atlantic: The World of the Lascelles, 1648-1834*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Vanderwood, Claire. "Darby Vassall." Washington Library Digital Encyclopedia. Accessed October 30, 2021.
<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/darby-vassall>
- W.C.N. "Darby Vassall." *The Liberator* (Boston, Massachusetts), Nov. 22, 1861.