"Ahead of Her Time"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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To stand here as a woman, speaking publicly, about Lydia Maria Child is humbling. When Child was born in 1802, there were no women ministers, nor would such a thing be tolerated. Only a few women were authors—bringing their voice into the public only on page, not in person. In 1824 at age 22, Lydia Maria Child joined their ranks with the publication of her first novel, *Hobomok, A Tale of Early Times (1824).*

While publication would itself be a remarkable feat, the content of this New England novel was also startling. Having spent a number of her teen years living with her sister in Maine, Child had "visited a nearby Penobscot settlement, beginning a lifelong interest in Native Americans."[i] In her novel, the white heroine initially "rebels against the religious and racial bigotry of her father" and marries a Native American man, bearing his child.[ii] Notably, with the blessing of her Native husband, Child's heroine leaves her interracial marriage to marry a white Episcopalian. After pushing her audience to a sympathetic rendition of Native American life as well as an interracial marriage and bi-racial child, Child ends on safer territory.

Encouraged by the reception of *Hobomok*, Child continued to write. Her next novel, *The Rebels, or Boston Before the Revolution (1825)* was less critically received. However, during these early years as an author, Child also penned her most popular volume, *The Frugal Housewife* (1829). Additionally, she became the first woman to be the editor of a national publication, *Juvenile Miscellany (1826-1834)*. In all these ways, Child appeared poised to be a successful author with an appreciative following—a rather extraordinary place to be for a woman in the early 19th century.

Then, in 1833, she made a choice. She might say she had no choice. Later in her life, she would write that an introduction had altered "the whole pattern of [her] life-web" and "got hold of the strings of [her] conscience and pulled [her] into reforms."[iii] The introduction that revolutionized her life was to William Lloyd Garrison. The reforms were abolishing slavery and promoting racial equality. Her choice was to publish, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans (1833),* the first book-length treatment of the history and institution of slavery in the United States.

Decades later, her friend and executor, Wendell Phillips, expressed in his eulogy:

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> "Hardly ever was there a costlier sacrifice. Few of us can appreciate it today. Narrow means just change to ease; after a weary struggle, fame and social position in her grasp; every door opening before her; the sweetness of having her genius recognized.
>
> No one had supposed that independence of opinion on a moral question would wreck all this. It was a thunderbolt from a summer sky. But confronted suddenly with the alternative, gagged life or total wreck,—she never hesitated."[iv]

And, she knew what she was doing. In the preface to *An Appeal*, Child writes,

> "I am fully aware of the unpopularity of the task I have undertaken; but though I *expect* ridicule and censure, it is not in my nature to *fear* them.
>
> A few years hence, the opinion of the world will be a matter in which I have not even the most transient interest; but this book will be abroad on its mission of humanity, long after the hand that wrote it is mingling with the dust.
>
> Should it be the means of advancing, even one single hour, the inevitable progress of truth and justice, I would not exchange the consciousness for all Rothchild's wealth, or Sir Walter's fame."[v]

Within a year, she lost the income of editing *Juvenile Miscellany* when the magazine folded. Subscribers had fled the popular subscription because of her choice. Also, having been given the very rare privilege as a woman to access the books of the Boston Athenaeum years before, they now rescinded her access. North and South they were repulsed by her embrace of abolitionist principles.

Child continued to publish anti-slavery texts and anti-slavery themes appear in her volume, *The History of the Condition of Women, in Various Ages and Nations* (1835). However, the popular audience and its accompanying income eluded her. She now belonged to a group of outcasts.

Despite the social ostracism and financial troubles, Child embraced her choice. In an 1867 letter to anti-slavery leader and Unitarian minister, Samuel J. May[vi], Child wrote,

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> "With regard to society, I was a gainer decidedly; for though the respectables, who had condescended to patronize me forthwith sent me "to Coventry," anti-slavery introduced me to the noblest and best of the land, intellectually and morally, and knit us together in that firm friendship which grows out of sympathy in a good but unpopular cause. Besides, it is impossible to estimate how much one's own character gains by a warfare which keeps the intellect wide awake, and compels one to reflect upon moral principles."[vii]

Child wrote that letter to Rev. May in 1867 while living up the road at 91 Old Sudbury Road. At 65, she had lived long enough to see Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, the Civil War, and the 13th Amendment's abolishment of slavery. The government of her nation had enacted the vision of freedom for which she had sacrificed so much. But, thirty-three years earlier when she published *An Appeal*, her cause was widely unpopular, even in Boston, even in Wayland. She was indeed a woman ahead of her time—as an author, an anti-slavery activist, a proponent of Native American rights, and as a woman demanding and living by principles of freedom.

Thirty-three years ago for us, it was 1986. There was no I.C.E., no Homeland Security, no War on Terror. We did not know the names of Monica Lewinsky or Anita Hill. The Berlin Wall still stood. In 1986, President Regan had yet to make a public speech about AIDS . . . and neither the AIDS Memorial Quilt nor the activist group ACT-UP had begun. Yoweri Museveni was sworn in as President of Uganda—a position he still holds, the Challenger fell from the sky, and the nuclear reactor at Chernobyl exploded.

Thirty-three years is enough time for so many changes and so short a time that many of us remember 1986. Thirty-three years from now it will be 2052. What will the world look like? What will Wayland look like? What unpopular causes today will have become the issues that changed everything?

Of course, thirty-three is no magic number. The markers of time (hours, days, years) are but one way to organize experiences, to tell a story. When Child wrote, *An Appeal*, she had no way of knowing its impact, nor how long the path towards abolishing slavery would be. And, when she wrote, *The History of the Condition of Women,* or separated her finances from her debt-prone husband, or lived for a time alone in New York City, she did not know that women would only be given the right to vote in the U.S. in 1920 . . . a full forty years after her death. (Although she did believe it was important for enslaved person to win their freedoms *before* women earned the right to vote—seeing it as the more pressing issue.)

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I wonder then what Lydia Maria Child would say or do today. I suspect she'd be out front in the Black Lives Matter moment and in challenging dynamics of white supremacy that continue to undermine racial equality. And, I think she'd be actively engaged in efforts to combat modern slavery. For while slavery is no longer legal in the United States, it does remain. The Council on Foreign Relations explains,

> Slavery exists any time a person has been recruited, transported, or compelled to work by "force, fraud, or coercion," according to the U.S. State Department. Victims do not have the means to leave of their own will. Slavery today most often occurs in industries that are labor intensive, low skilled, and underregulated.[viii]

The United Nations estimates that more than 40 million people are enslaved worldwide.[ix] Often the story of enslavement begins with a person looking for a job. Promised one thing, people find themselves forced into other work and deeply indebted to their captors for relocation, housing, or food. And/or, they may be threatened with violence to themselves or loved ones if they attempt to leave. In a blog, Professor Benjamin Lawrance writes, "because people are not being owned any more, it doesn't mean it's not slavery. People who are exploited in extreme conditions for little or no pay without being able to leave – that's slavery."[x]

In the United States, the Global Slavery Index estimates more than 400,000 persons work in conditions of slavery on a given day. This includes sex workers and domestic workers as well as persons working in agriculture, restaurants, traveling sales crews, the health and beauty industry, and more.[xi] And yet, to many of us, the issue remains hidden . . . even unthinkable in our modern world.

Earlier this year, one woman, Lanyun Ma, was arrested on human trafficking charges during the broad sting of massage parlors in Florida.[xii] She had previously been convicted in 2012 of using a massage spa as a cover for prostitution in nearby Oxford, Massachusetts.[xiii] According to a report on illicit massage businesses by Polaris, the leading anti-slavery organization, there is a strong link between human trafficking and illicit massage parlors.[xiv]

After the news from Florida, a group of women in Wayland began wondering about massage parlors here in town. Their story is on the front page of today's *Boston Globe.*[xv] They began asking questions of businesses on Boston Post Road—places located within a quarter mile of where we sit. Within days of starting to ask questions of the businesses, the police, and the landlords, two massage parlors were closed and gone. The article details

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how the Wayland police had also been watching. During an inspection, the police had even found evidence of a person living on site at one business.

Without a full investigation, we cannot be certain about the activities in the business, nor of the conditions and status of the women who worked there. But, we can keep asking questions. We can educate ourselves about the issue of human trafficking and modern slavery. Read the Globe article, visit the website of the group of women, onesquared.org, and read their recommended links. And, perhaps most importantly, we can report suspected situations of human trafficking to the National Human Trafficking Hotline: (888) 373-7888.

In 1980, on the 100th Anniversary of Lydia Maria Child's death, then minister of First Parish, Ken Sawyer, delivered a graveside service up the road at the Old North Cemetery where Child is buried. Ken concluded his remarks with a quote from a letter Child sent to the parents of Robert Gould Shaw. Shaw had died in July 1863 while leading the first black company of soldiers—a group commemorated on the plaque across from the State House in Boston. At the time of Shaw's death, Rev. Edmund Sears was minister here at First Parish. Moved by Sears' memorial of Shaw, Child sent this quote of Sears to his parents:

> "Fame, in the vulgar sense of that word, is a worthless shadow; but to live through the long future in the affections of men, to have the hearts of a coming generations for one's burial-place, to raise them to unselfish aims, inspire their genius, and kindle their enthusiasm, this is more than compensation for all the sacrifices of this mortal state."[xvi]

Like Ken, I find these words a fitting tribute not only to Shaw, but also to Child.

As we remember her story, her choices and her sacrifices, may we be inspired to not simply relegate Child to an interesting local historical figure ahead of her time. Instead, may we consider how she might hold a place in our hearts, inspire our thinking, and kindle our enthusiasm to act for justice on behalf of others. I am inspired by the work of the women profiled in today's *Globe* and imagine that if Lydia Maria Child were alive today they might be meeting at her kitchen table on Old Sudbury Road. Injustice is not only a 19th century problem. May we choose to be part of the 21st century actions.

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[i] "Lydia Maria Child", Joan Goodwin, *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography,* http://uudb.org/articles/lydiamariachild.html, accessed April 27, 2019.
[ii] "Lydia Maria Child", Deborah P. Clifford, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lydia-maria-child, accessed April 26, 2019.
[iii] Letter to Miss Anne Whitney, Wayland, June 1879. Quoted in "Lydia Maria Child: A paper Delivered at the Wayland Historical Society," Ken Sawyer, October 14, 2001.
[iv] "An Appendix," by Wendell Phillips in *Letters of Lydia Maria Child with a Biographical Introduction,"* by John G. Whittier, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1883), 264.
[v] *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans,* Mrs. Child, (New York: John S. Taylor, 1836), Preface.
[vi] There is no family relation between Samuel J. May and myself—although my domestic partner is in fact a descendent.
[vii] *Letters of Lydia Maria Child with a Biographical Introduction,"* by John G. Whittier, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1883), 194.
[viii] "Modern Day Slavery", https://www.cfr.org/interactives/modern-slavery/#!/section2/item-4, accessed April 27, 2019.
[ix] "Human Trafficking in Illicit Massage Businesses," Polaris Report, p.2. https://polarisproject.org/sites/default/files/Full_Report_Human_Trafficking_in_Illicit_Massage_Businesses.pdf Accessed April 28, 2019.
[x] "The Slave at Number 58," Benjamin Lawrance, https://www.antislavery.org/the-slave-at-number-58/. Accessed April 27, 2019.
[xi] "United States", The Global Slavery Index, https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/2018/findings/country-studies/united-states/. Accessed April 27, 2019.
[xii] "How Vero Beach police landed the only human trafficking charge in recent Florida busts," Mary Helen Moore, *Treasure Coast Newspapers,* Feb. 26, 2019. https://www.tcpalm.com/story/news/crime/indian-river-county/2019/02/26/who-only-person-actually-charged-human-trafficking-florida-spa-investigation/2983335002/. Accessed April 27, 2019. "
[xiii] "Woman who ran Oxford massage parlor, arrested in 2012, now involved in Kraft Florida scandal," Brian Lee, *Worcestor Telegram*, February 26, 2019. https://www.telegram.com/news/20190226/woman-who-ran-oxford-massage-parlor-arrested-in-2012-now-involved-in-kraft-florida-scandal. Accessed April 27, 2019.
[xiv] "Human Trafficking in Illicit Massage Businesses," Polaris Report, https://polarisproject.org/sites/default/files/Full_Report_Human_Trafficking_in_Illicit_Massage_Businesses.pdf.
[xv] "In Wayland, suburban dog-walking moms target sex trafficking," Stephanie Ebbert, *Boston Globe,* Sunday, April 27, 2019. https://www2.bostonglobe.com/metro/2019/04/27/wayland-suburban-moms-take-aim-sex-trafficking/h9Mts6VbKjY7zQoAN76lZK/story.html?et_rid=1768515745&s_campaign=todaysheadlines:newsletter
[xvi] Private research of Rev. Ken Sawyer. First Parish in Wayland archives.

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