

In 1838, a Maryland slave named Frederick Bailey, age 20, escaped from bondage, making use of the recently constructed Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Railroad. By rail, Frederick effected his flight in only one day. “A new world had opened upon me,” he wrote later, recalling the moment he first stood upon free soil. “If life is more than breath, and the ‘quick round of blood, ’I lived more in one day than in a year of my slave life.” Later that year, he was married to the free black woman who had helped him escape, and the couple—who had adopted the surname “Johnson”—settled in Massachusetts. Here, Frederick Johnson became a licensed preacher, and in time he and his wife adopted a new last name: Douglass.

In Massachusetts, Frederick Douglass was introduced to *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison’s weekly paper, which cultivated within him an even more abiding hatred of slavery than he’d harbored before. Garrison was an abolitionist, and was striving to help people to seek what is above as Paul says in our second reading; namely to think more deeply about their faith.

Not long after subscribing to “*The Liberator*,” Douglass attended a lecture delivered by Garrison in 1841. His words inspired Douglas to become a preacher himself. Despite his fears of public speaking, it wasn’t long before

Frederick Douglass was sharing his own story in public until, in 1843, he was invited by Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society on a speaking tour of the country with a group of other lecturers. For six months, the tour addressed audiences on the topic of slavery. More than once, Douglass was physically attacked by crowds (once, he was beaten so badly that his hand was broken; it never fully healed). Then, in 1845, Douglass published his autobiography—"Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave"—and it quickly became a bestseller.

Becoming a well-known speaker in the north, Douglas was not one to mince words; because he saw on the one hand a Christian nation, but he also saw on the other hand those who had been blinded to the reality of sin. Worshipping one minute, then treating people with incredible cruelty the second. His speeches would often cut to the heart to make people think more deeply.

In his 77 years, Douglass delivered thousands of speeches. He published three autobiographies. He founded and edited newspapers. He attended the first great women's rights convention, in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. He met with President Abraham Lincoln to lobby for emancipation.

He championed the cause of African American civil and political equality after the Civil War. He lived to see the tragic onset of Jim Crow and fought the oppressive system of racial segregation, disenfranchisement, and violence until he died in 1895 (a year before the notorious Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld segregation under the “separate but equal” doctrine).

Yet there’s a side of Douglass that’s not often remembered or celebrated: his Christian faith. Douglass was a kind of prophet crying in the wilderness of Christian slaveholding America. It’s no coincidence that in the most famous speech of his life—“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”—Douglass quoted the prophet Isaiah at length. He aspired to speak to America as biblical prophets once spoke to their people: with words of warning and rebuke, grace and hope. He wanted people to realize how thoroughly slavery had distorted their view of reality and kept them from loving as Christ loves.

Before his escape at age 20, Douglass witnessed and endured great cruelty, especially at the hands of Christian masters.

Young Douglass spent most of his earliest childhood days on the sprawling plantation of the Lloyd family, one of Maryland's wealthiest slaveholders.

There, Douglass first saw horrible violence and depravity that accompanied slavery, including his aunt Hester, being brutally beaten by a cruel master.

He witnessed this at the age of six or seven. Douglass was a bright boy, so he soon asked the hardest questions: Why am I a slave? Why must slaves like Hester endure such pain, even unto death? Where is God? Why is he silent in our suffering?

Douglass suspected that the answers he heard from white southern Christians could not be right. How could God, in perfect wisdom and goodness, have made black people to be slaves and white people to be masters? Perhaps, he thought, it "was not color, but crime, not God, but man" that created slavery. And, perhaps, greed - the greed not just of money but of power that influenced men's hearts to perpetuate it.

In 1826, Douglass was sent to Baltimore to live with Hugh and Sophia Auld. Late one Sunday night, he woke to the sound of Sophia, a devout Methodist, reading from the first chapter of the Book of Job. He learned the alphabet here and eventually how to read. And it was during these

formative years that he cast all his cares upon God, Douglass wrote, he found faith in Christ as “Redeemer, Friend, and Savior.”

Not long after, in March 1833, Hugh Auld unexpectedly sent Douglass back to the Eastern Shore. For the next three years, Douglass labored for the first time as a field hand, physically and spiritually exhausting work. During this time, he saw just how completely slaveholders distorted the Christian faith to justify their violence and oppression. His most outwardly religious masters were the most depraved in their cruelty.

Eventually escaping, Douglass took few possessions on his long journey to freedom. He left behind his chains, but not his prophetic Christian faith that first took root in slavery. And he came to know God had a job for him to do, to get people to wake up. For he saw how individual slaveholders professed Christianity while failing to live up to Christ’s commands. Every believer shared that failure. Far worse was how, at an institutional level, slavery and the Christian church—in the North and South—remained inextricably connected. “The slave auctioneer’s bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master,” Douglass

lamented. The slaveholder fills church coffers with gold, and, in turn, the pastor “covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity.”

Douglass rejoiced in 1865 when the Union triumphed in the Civil War and the nation ratified the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery forever. But he did not believe his prophetic work had ended. He lived the rest of his life working for civil rights and striving to change hearts and minds.

Why did he do all this? I’d suggest it’s because he took Paul’s words to heart to seek what is above. Throughout his life, he suffered so much; and when he finally gained his freedom, rather than focus on just staying alive and trying to establish himself, he selflessly risked so much to help others see the truth that all are created equal.

What it is that caused so many to think that slavery was acceptable? And even more specifically, what is it that caused so many Christians in the time of Douglas to have this disconnect from their worship and how they lived out their faith? Certainly on one hand the effects of original sin that blind the intellect to seeing the truth. But I’d also suggest that it was greed.

Now when we think of that term there's often a quick association with money. But it's much more than that; some have a greed for honor; some have a greed for power; some have a greed for money, others pleasure. And you saw all of these things with respect to slavery; some, like Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy, saw whites as superior and blacks created as inferior to them. Others saw slaves purely from an economic point of view; they were a means to provide for others and cheap labor. And others saw the superiority of one race over the other. All of it goes back to greed, and against this you had people who said no, this is wrong. But note Douglas did not do it with violence or hate - he wanted to shine a mirror on people to get them to think.

So how about us? In our reading this week, we hear of Qoheleth, who is often identified as King Solomon in old age looking back. And he laments; the first reading comes across almost as if he is saying "what was the point of it all?" Solomon had power and wealth; but still he was mortal. The point is not that in and of themselves wealth or power or honor are bad, but when one puts all their energy into them, it begs the question, why? And in the Gospel, when we hear of the man who has so much he needs to build a bigger barn, and then presumably will need to build yet another barn down

the road, he too will be mortal and die, but the deeper question Jesus asks is what will his life have been about?

Two takeaways from this reading: what are our lives about, and how can we, as Douglas, be a mirror to others to help them see the right path to take?

In the time of Douglas, some people's lives were about honor, power, wealth, control; the same is true for us today. If you want to see a character study in this go re-watch the classic "Citizen Kane," where Charles Foster Kane dies alone in his mansion Xanadu with no one save his paid servants as he never learned to give or receive love, the most important thing.

Greed on so many levels consumes him. And for ourselves, we need to sit with this and think again not of just greed as wanting money, but where things are at in our lives. Slavery may be a thing of the past here, but inside all of us can be the desire to misuse people or control them. We ask ourselves those tough questions, do we rely on honor too much? Are we obsessed with money and possessions? Do we manipulate others so as to get our way? Do we put so much energy into recognition that we don't do things for the right reason? If we are fixed on Christ as Paul tells us, we'll

know how to handle things. Most importantly, we'll find true happiness, which is in having a relationship with God, and our human relationships. Douglas, writing of his own conversion to Christianity, wrote "I finally found my burden lightened and my heart relived. I loved all mankind, slaveholders not excepted, though I abhorred slavery more than ever." He'd have his kids read verses of the Bible each night as a family. And, later in life, Helen Pits, whom Frederick Douglas married after his first wife died, was a white woman, a suffragist; and people looked down on her marriage including her family. But they put love ahead of honor, and found true happiness. So how about us? When we keep things in their proper place and don't let them take over, putting them behind God and other people, we too will find the happiness we seek.

Lastly, we help others to seek what is above. What do our actions say about who we are? Katharine Drexel who became a saint grew up in wealth, but from her parents she learned so much, namely a love for the poor as they did much to help the less fortunate of Philadelphia. Through our words, through our actions, we need to help others also to see the truth of how to live. Sometimes like Douglas it means taking a stand against something that involves greed on some level; saying no, this is racism, no

this is you taking what belongs to God and redefining it based on your own beliefs, or no this isn't right to treat the poor like this or you are living your dreams and wants through your children. Other times it's a way of life; we help others seek what is above through the choices we make to give to charity, to work hard and provide for the family, to be detached, helping others to realize the truth that, as Cardinal Francis George of Chicago once said, the only thing you take with you into the life to come is what you've given away on earth.

Douglas in his life went from a slave, the son of a white man and a black mother, to a man who was one of the most famous in America with a lot of powerful friends and political connections. But he realized something, that his life wasn't about himself, but about using what he had been given to change the world, to be a man of hope, to help others realize that they were called to something greater. He knew what he carried with him was the quality of his love. So like him, let's not focus on building a bigger barn, but rather build up our treasure in heaven by going into this world and living and proclaiming the truth, remembering that so much of what we think matters so much is the stuff we can't take with us, but what we can do is

grow in a love for God and, like Douglas, change the world for the better through seeking what is above and helping one another to do the same.