

## 1 Sermon, September 15, 2013

Texts: Matthew 8:28-34, Matthew 5:3-12

Title: "American Faith: Harriet Beecher Stowe"

1. Harriet Beecher Stowe was an evangelist
2. Freedom's purpose: Tom, Topsy, George Harris
3. Sanctification as contagious
4. Religion of the heart, Giving Jesus your all
5. Lay hands on the sufferer
6. Social sin

### Intro

How many of you have read the book Uncle Tom's Cabin?  
Probably a few years back.

It was written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852, less than ten years before the American civil war. How much this one book had to do with the civil war has been a matter of a great deal of debate, but it is certain that it's story galvanized public opinion against slavery, and allowed the North to see the civil war as in some measure God's judgment upon the evils of slavery.

Uncle Tom's cabin is a political book, but it is as much a spiritual book. For those of you who don't remember the book, it revolves around several intertwined stories of slaves and their masters, friends and enemies.

The central figure is Uncle Tom, an African-American slave who is upright, honest and responsible, and in charge of much of the work of his master in Kentucky. Through the inept management of his master, who has lost money to creditors, Tom is sold to a slave trader. Tom's sale means he has to leave his wife and three children, but he is obedient and goes when he is sold.

He luckily gets bought by a gentleman from New Orleans, who soon puts Tom in a responsible position in his household. Tom has it good, for a while, and his faith rubs off on his owner, who resolves to fight the institution of slavery, but then suddenly dies. After this, Tom is sold again, and winds up on the cotton plantation of Simon Legree, who is the worst sort of abusive master. Tom is abused, but keeps his faith. Tom becomes an encouragement to the faith of the slaves around him. At the moment of Tom's death at the hands of his master, he has given over his soul to Christ, and dies triumphant. Simon Legree may own his body, but he never owned his soul.

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A parallel story is of a young slave woman named Eliza, who lived on the Kentucky farm where Tom was originally. Eliza had married a slave named George from a neighboring farm. George was smart, and his master hired him out to a local producer of hemp rope, and George invented a machine used in the process. George's master got angry that his slave seemed smarter than himself, and took George away from the factory, and subjected him to the most degrading of labor.

Meanwhile, the same slave trader who has purchased Tom also purchases George and Eliza's small son. But before he can take possession, Eliza escapes to Ohio and the underground railroad. She is helped by some Quaker families who also help George, and they are reunited and free in Canada.

~~This is a vast simplification of the novel, which has many more characters, and much description. The novel portrays the spiritual struggle of the slaves, those who own slaves, sympathetic northerners who even so don't like blacks, and so on.~~

### 1. Harriet Beecher Stowe was an evangelist

The whole book shows that Harriet Beecher Stowe, who grew up as a daughter of a famous congregational minister, was deeply concerned about people's immortal souls. She was an evangelist, urging people to give their hearts to Christ.

### 2. Freedom's purpose: Tom, Topsy, George Harris

In fact, many of the central characters give their hearts to Christ, and it results in a great freedom.

For Tom, it results in the freedom of spirit that he gives to his fellow slaves, even on his deathbed.

For George and Eliza, it is a freedom that causes George to be educated in France and settle in Liberia, where he will help build a new country.

For a different George, master George, it results in him setting all his slaves free and hiring them to work for him.

For a different Tom, Tom Loker, the slave hunter is cared for by Quakers and becomes a new man.

For Cousin Ophelia, it is a new understanding to her Christian faith, that she must love African-Americans and be willing to touch and be touched.

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For Cousin Ophelia's adopted little slave girl, she is transformed from a mischievous imp into a Christian missionary who sails to Africa to convert the heathen.

#### 3. Sanctification as contagious

In the 1840s, ten years before she wrote the book, Harriet Beecher Stowe found herself caught up in the perfectionist turn that swept through American evangelical circles. Stowe got caught up in the holiness teachings of Phoebe Palmer, the Methodist lay-leader who taught that those who believed could receive a "second blessing" of "entire sanctification."

John Wesley had felt that entire sanctification was extremely rare, but always to be sought after. Phoebe Palmer taught that entire sanctification should be expected when a person gave his or her all to Christ.

Harriet Beecher Stowe herself experienced something beautiful when she surrendered herself to Christ, which gave her the deep desire that others should experience it as well.

You can see the spiritual struggle when Stowe writes about Uncle Tom himself. Here's what she wrote:

When a heavy weight presses the soul to the lowest level at which endurance is possible, there is an instant and desperate effort of every physical and moral nerve to throw off the weight; and hence the heaviest anguish often precedes a return tide of joy and courage.

So was it now with Tom. The atheistic taunts of his cruel master sunk his before dejected soul to the lowest ebb; ~~and, though the hand of faith still held to the eternal rock, it was a numb, despairing grasp.~~

Tom sat, like one stunned, at the fire. Suddenly everything around him seemed to fade, and a vision rose before him of one crowned with thorns, buffeted and bleeding. Tom gazed, in awe and wonder, at the majestic patience of the face; the deep, pathetic eyes thrilled him to his inmost heart; his soul woke, as, with floods of emotion, he stretched out his hands and fell upon his knees,—when, gradually, the vision changed: the sharp thorns became rays of glory; and, in splendor inconceivable, he saw that same face bending compassionately towards him, and a voice said, "He that overcometh shall sit down with me on my throne, even as I also overcome, and am set down with my Father on his throne."

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How long Tom lay there, he knew not. When he came to himself, the fire was gone out, his clothes were wet with the chill and drenching dews; but the dread soul-crisis was past, and, in the joy that filled him, he no longer felt hunger, cold, degradation, disappointment, wretchedness.

From his deepest soul, he that hour loosed and parted from every hope in life that now is, and offered his own will an unquestioning sacrifice to the Infinite. Tom looked up to the silent, ever-living stars,—types of the angelic hosts who ever look down on man; and the solitude of the night rung with the triumphant words of a hymn. . .

### 4. Religion of the heart, Giving Jesus your all

This was a religion of the heart. It was not just some intellectual assent to the truth of faith. No, it was giving Christ your will, which meant not just feeling good about yourself, but making a difference with your actions.

Each of the spiritually transformed Characters in the novel makes a difference for someone else. They adopt, they set free, they encourage, they lead, they minister to the sick, they shine forth with the peace of Christ.

### 5. Lay hands on the sufferer

Part of what Stowe taught in her novel was to care for the suffering. Her version of holiness perfectionism suggests that sanctified Christians, in their ability to more perfectly imitate Christ, can more fully enter into the sufferings of others than the unsanctified can.

So Stowe writes, when young Master George is grieving over the body of his beloved Uncle Tom,

And blessed are the men whom he calls to fellowship with him, bearing their cross after him with patience. Of such it is written, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Each of these transformed characters in the book reaches out to someone who is suffering. They sit with them, hold their hands, they pray for them and with them. This is the kind of compassion for the suffering that Stowe tells us is one of the essential parts of being a Christian.

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### 6. Social sin

But there is more in the book than this. Some 50 years before Walter Rauschenbusch put it into his books on Social Christianity, Stowe writes of social sin.

Slavery was a sin, a blot against humanity, and everyone who participated in it or benefitted by it was stained by it.

Simon Legree, Uncle Tom's owner and tormentor, was in turn tormented by his knowledge of what was right. Jesus and Christianity were a torment to this man so possessed by the devil's ways.

In chapter 38, quoting from Matthew 8, a voice roused within Legree's soul, saying, "What have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth?--art thou come to torment us before the time?"

At that time, sin would have been seen by most as a personal thing, between the person and God. But for Stowe, slavery as a legal and social institution was a sin; it was a sin that would draw down the wrath of God on the nation.

Stowe believed that even those who were conscious of slavery's moral evil were helpless as individuals to change the system. So Stowe, through her writing, tried to increase the number of people who felt the weight of slavery's evil, and would pray for its end. It was God who would end slavery, and so the nation's soul needed to be turned to God.

We can see the idea in the poetry of Julia Ward Howe, less than ten years later, in her words in the Battle Hymn of the Republic. God's "fateful lightning and terrible swift sword" would be the one to destroy slavery once and for all. God had read the "righteous sentence" on slavery and slavery was condemned to die.

You may not have read Uncle Tom's Cabin, but you have been affected by the writing of Harriet Beecher Stowe. You have recited that the USA is "one nation, under God." This is partly her influence. You know in your heart that Christians care for those who are suffering. This is also partly her influence.

And you are reminded that nothing, in all of creation, can separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

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“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” Matthew 5:3-12, NRSV.

“When he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met him. They were so fierce that no one could pass that way. Suddenly they shouted, “What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the time?” Now a large herd of swine was feeding at some distance from them. The demons begged him, “If you cast us out, send us into the herd of swine.” And he said to them, “Go!” So they came out and entered the swine; and suddenly, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea and perished in the water. The swineherds ran off, and on going into the town, they told the whole story about what had happened to the demoniacs. Then the whole town came out to meet Jesus; and when they saw him, they begged him to leave their neighborhood.” Matthew 8:28-34, NRSV.