

Muskegon County Cooperating Churches
Peace & Justice Blog
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Payment Overdue by Tom Wagner

The Liberty Bell—one of the United States' best-known icons—bears a biblical quote: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land unto the inhabitants thereof. Lev. XXV v. X." These words were cast onto the bell about a generation before the Declaration of Independence, when most colonists still considered themselves loyal British subjects. It was also an era when Quakers controlled Pennsylvania's legislature. While Americans generally associate "liberty" with personal freedom, in the larger context of this scripture the focus is on the common good. Leviticus 25 numbers among a group of passages found in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible that outline an economic regulatory system based on seven-year cycles (Sabbaticals), culminating in a Jubilee year at the end of seven Sabbatical years. The system intended to create an equitable and sustainable society. By proclaiming "the acceptable year of the Lord" at his home synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus included this system as part of his messianic platform (Luke 4:18-21). Though Sabbatical and Jubilee values can be applied to a variety of contemporary issues, American society's debt for nearly 250 years (5 Jubilee cycles) of unpaid forced labor is one concern that comes to mind as we commemorate Juneteenth and Independence Day.

For folks unfamiliar with biblical Sabbatical and Jubilee practices, following is a brief outline with references.

Every seven years: Cropland was to be left fallow (Exodus 23:10-11, Leviticus 25:2-7). Slaves were to be set free after 6 years of service (Exodus 21:16, Deuteronomy 15:12-18). (Deuteronomy 15:13-15 commands that former slaves not beset away empty-handed. Debts were to be canceled. (Deuteronomy 15:1-11).

During the Jubilee year: All the Sabbatical provisions mentioned above were to be practiced, plus real estate was to be restored to the family of origin (Leviticus 25:8-53). The fallow year intended to give the land a Sabbath rest. Debt, land and slavery were closely linked in ancient Israel's economy. A family in need of tools and supplies often mortgaged land allotted to them by their tribe and clan. If they became unable to pay back the loan at harvest, they may have to sell the land. When land was no longer available, members of the family were often sold into slavery to cover the debt. Israel was inconsistent in its practice of these provisions. However, the ideal became part of the prophetic tradition. Jeremiah 34 and II Chronicles 36 suggest the fall of Judah largely was due to failure to practice Sabbatical and Jubilee.

My Dunker forbears weren't as active in the Abolition Movement as the Quakers, but they did consistently forbid slave ownership among their membership. Enslavers who wished to join the church had first to free their slaves. Yearly Meeting minutes from 1782 and 1797 required former enslavers to provide adults with a new set of clothes. Children could remain under their care until the age of majority, but in the meantime, they were to be taught to read and write, a rather subversive act at the time. By 1854, Yearly Meeting also

required former enslavers to pay back wages for past labor as determined by the local congregation, and provide safe transportation to free-soil. Granted few enslavers were knocking down meetinghouse doors to join a plain, mostly German speaking pacifist sect, but it happened enough to make these policies necessary.

Sadly, our larger society that has so richly benefited from the forced labor of some and stolen land from others has repeatedly refused to take responsibility for its debt. The promise of “forty acres and a mule” during the final months of the Civil War would have been a bargain for 250 years of unpaid wages and given former enslaved people some economic stability. Unfortunately, Lincoln’s successor Andrew Johnson rescinded General Sherman’s Special Field Order 15 soon after taking office. In 1915, former slave Callie House sued the U.S. Treasury for reparations to be paid to former enslaved persons as pensions based on taxes collected on cotton for the years 1862-1868. The Wilson Administration replied that former slaves should seek compensation from their former enslavers. Considering laws enforced across the U.S. under slavery and Jim Crow there is a larger “social obligation”. I find it curious how some people quote the portion of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech about judging someone by the content of their character, not skin color in opposition to affirmative action. Yet they ignore that he also said black people and their allies were marching that day to collect on “a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’”

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For further reading on Sabbatical and Jubilee years see:
André Trocmé, Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution, ed. Charles E. Moore, trans. Michael H. Shank & Marlin E. Miller, (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2014) especially Ch. 2 and 3.

For further reading on Reparations see:
Nikole Hannah-Jones, “Justice”, The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story, ed. Nikole Hannah-Jones, et. al. (NY: One World, 2021)
A longer essay by Tom Wagner on Sabbatical & Jubilee can be found online at:
<https://www.brethrenlifeandthought.org/.../rhythms-of.../>

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