Slavery in Scituate
A Lay-led Sermon delivered on June 19, 2022

Speaker 1: The laws and policies that built the institution of slavery in colonies and in the United States of America were complex. Without a doubt though these laws and policies established that people could be considered legal property to be bought, sold, owned forever, gifted and inherited. When Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, he realized that he did not have the legal authority to free enslaved people Slavery was deepy embedded in the Consitution, not explicitly but clearly, and the Fifth amendment clearly stated that the federal government could not take away a citizens property without due process. The Dred Scott Supreme Court case in 1857 reinforced the Consitutionality of slavery. Lincoln himself had a complex history with the issue of slavery, coming from the free-soil midwest. Free-soilers may or may not have thought slavery immoral as Lincoln did but they did know it would undercut the value of paid labor (meaning white labor.) It is not surprising that Lincoln couched the Emancipation Proclamation as a military measure to seize "contraband" that was supporting the armies of the Confederacy. That enslaved people in Galveston did not know of the Emancipation Proclamation is unrealistic, but that they were still enslaved is indisputable. Only the thirteenth amendment would definitively resolve this legal obstacle.

But the history of slavery is far more complicated than this story from the end of the Civil War. The whole country had a complex relationship with this "peculiar institution." The earliest records of colonization of the Americas are rife with stories of all European nations enslaving indigenous peoples. We have all heard of the first group of enslaved Africans brought to Point Comfort, Virginia in the Chesapeake Bay in 1619. We know this as the start of slavery supporting agriculture in the southern states. We are perhaps less aware of the extent of slavery in all colonies before the Revolutionary War. In our area, the roots of slavery go back to clashes with native peoples over land and power. In wars such as King Phillip's War, per

capita the most devastating war in American history, captured native peoples were enslaved and sent to far flung places like Bermuda and the Caribbean and traded for more controllable Africans. Scituate itself had more slaves per capita than anywhere else in Plymouth County.

Professor Eliot West, a western historian at the University of Arkansas says that "Race is the burden of American history. Its questions speak to all of us, whichever region we call home, and press up to ask where and how we have fallen short in promises we have made to ourselves." In our own region we need to understand and address the complexities of the past. For as Willilam Faulkner wrote, "The past isn't dead; it isn't even past."

Speaker 2: In 1779, in Scituate, on Main Street (which is now Route 123) on the land that extends from the 3a bridge up to and through the blueberry farm, 4 years before the Massachusetts Supreme Court applied the principle of judicial review to abolish slavery in Massachusetts, 84 years before the Emancipation Proclamation and 86 years before news of emanciapation reached Galveston TX, lived people who were enslaved by an esteemed Scituate family.

Prince Warden was one person enslaved by Chief Justice Cushing and wife Hannah. Some details of Warden's life were captured in the written record of history because of his proximity to Chief Justice Cushing and his involvement in documented legal proceedings. It was in 1779 that Warden threatened to sue the Cushings for reneging on the promise to grant him his freedom. Only after the Massachusetts Attorney General pressured the Cushings to follow through on their promise was Prince Warden given his freedom.

In the book *Old Scituate*, compiled by the Chief Justice Cushing Daughters of the American Revolution in 1921, the attitude of people as property still permeates the way Prince's life is documented. In describing the Cushing's home it was said that

“The house itself was richly furnished, and contained many valuable papers and mementoes gathered and preserved by the family. On the death of Madam Cushing, these treasures were distributed among the relatives of both families. We have been told of the great white settle that stood in the ordinary dining- room, a favorite seat for young lovers and of “the great kitchen full of n—----,” family servitors bequeathed to Judge and Madam. Prince, the black coachman, had been given to Madam Cushing by her father when she was a young girl.” He is mentioned with no context given around his humanity, his enslavement or his freedom, towards the end of a list of furnishings and household objects.

Though what happened to Prince Warden in his later life is left unrecorded, at least as I can find, we do know that he played an active and crucial role in the activity of our early nation. The DAR Old Scituate history book recounts that “The duties of the Supreme Court Justices were not heavy at first; the most arduous task was the traveling made necessary by the extent of the different circuits, which extended from Falmouth (Portland), Me., to Augusta, Ga. The distances were covered by Judge Cushing in a traveling chaise drawn by two horses, driven by the Judge, while Prince . . . followed in a lighter vehicle containing his own and Madam Cushing’s luggage.”

We are still complicit in valuing objects over the dignity of human liberation. The carriages mentioned above are preserved today across the street in the Cudworth House. In fact, just on Friday, I drove by while the carriages were rolled out in the bright sunshine on display for a school group. While I was not there to hear how the interpreter addressed the students, I know that on my last visit to the historic site, the story of Prince, his enslavement at the hands of the Chief Justice and Prince’s fight for a freedom promised to him were not documented for the public.

Speaker 3: In 2018, I was searching for a project in Scituate which I could use to obtain the rank of Life in Boy Scouts. I chose what, to me as a history buff, seemed like a cool project: To clean out the Cudworth Barn, right across the street from us. Upon entering the stuffed, dusty barn, I immediately noticed a small, dark carriage sitting in the loft. It was low, with no top, and made of fine leather and wood. I was told that this carriage was one of their most prized possessions; As Jen just said, it had carried Chief Justice Cushing all around the country during the first years of our Country's life. I talked for hours with the staff members about the carriage, its history, and how it came to Scituate. I learned a lot, but one seemingly small but crucial person was always left out of the story, which was Prince, Justice Cushing's driver.

157 years have passed between the reading in Galveston, and our community sitting here, in this building, on this land now. In my view, 157 years feels to be quite a long bit of time. When thinking of what to write for this service, I found myself asking, simply, "Well why would I care? Why does Juneteenth matter in Scituate, and how does it relate to us?" And, in its literal definition, it doesn't. A holiday celebrating a community we never knew, in an area that many of us have never been into, at a time we don't remember, for a group we, in the North, did not enslave at that time.

Looking into this, I realized that Juneteenth is much more than just the celebration of historical events, 157 years ago on this day. While we still celebrate this community, Juneteenth is, in the words of those who have pushed for its nationalization as a holiday, about commemorating and embodying their wishes of freedom, safety, and peace. Juneteenth is about remembering those in our own community who, even after the battle for freedom seemed won, continued the struggle to improve, liberate, and create a better world for all. Juneteenth commemorates the honor and strength of both the known and the unknown, people like Prince, who spent his entire life backing and enabling our first Chief Justice to

lay the framework for the country we live in today. It commemorates the over 160 enslaved people who lived in Scituate and Norwell, and their massive impact on our local shipbuilding industry, and on all others to whom they were in bondage. It commemorates the Natives of this land, who helped our early community to grow and thrive, and who, after King Philip's War, were used as disposable labor to increase the wealth of our communities own citizens down in the Caribbean. Juneteenth commemorates all those who fought against oppression, and strove to create a better world: The abolitionists of Scituate, the soldiers of Scituate, the protesters of Scituate; All those who stood up for a cause, knowing well the price.

As we end this service, I invite you all to think to think about our church's own ties to slavery, both in the names we know, and the names we do not know. People like the Watermans, the donors of the beautiful stain glass window beside us, who made their money in banking, an industry heavily centered on investment in southern cotton and its exports up to northern industry, and indirectly centered on slavery. The Scituate families of pre-revolutionary times and their enslaved people, like the family of Belle House Neck, many of whom would have been a part of our congregation, left their Scituate estates to continue their business down in the Caribbean, and brought their enslaved servants with them, who likely lived out the rest of their lives in shackles. I invite you to also reflect on the names that we do not know, those of the over 160 enslaved people in Scituate who we will likely never know, and whose stories are now lost to history. Some of them may have worshiped in this church - not this building - but this church with their owners. Think about them, and think about their crucial, but forgotten legacy in Scituate. Juneteenth is about many things, but today, let us reflect on our connection, bring it to light, and celebrate all those in our past, enslaved or not, who have fought to break the shackles of tyranny in return for freedom, hate in return for love, and prejudice in return for understanding. What can we do to honor those who helped to build this town? How can we learn and share their stories?