

Grace Note: Jesus, Maria Murray, Breonna Tayler and Me

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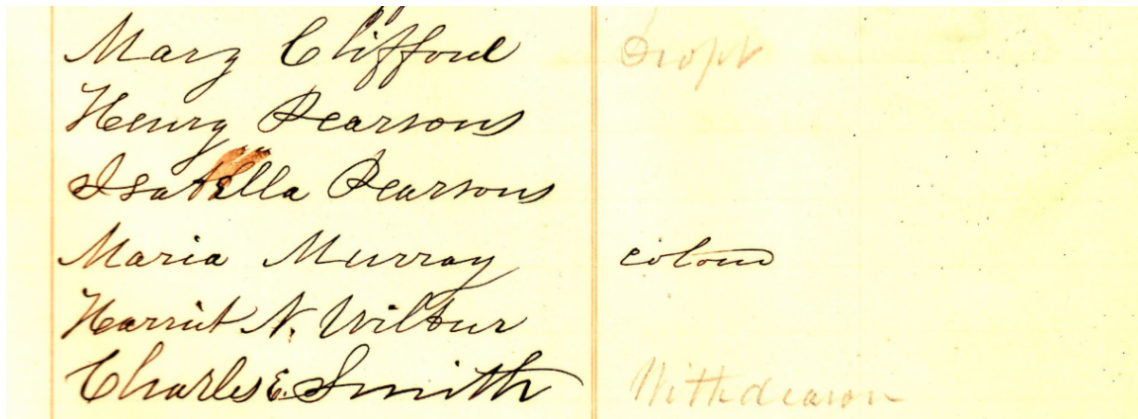


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September 25, 2020

Beloved in Christ,

Last night, I went back in history and found great comfort reading about one of my favorite black women: Maria Murray. Maria lived in Evanston for forty-six years and I have visited her at the Rosehill Cemetery where she is buried. I first met Maria Murray when I arrived at First Church two years ago and was consuming copious amounts of First Church history to understand its roots and DNA. I found Maria Murray listed in the September 29, 1859, record of probationary members of First Church (i.e. Inquirers Class!). That was only five years after the church was founded, and thirty-six years before Donald Trump's first ancestor immigrated to the United States. Next to Maria's name is the word: colour.



Turns out Maria Murray is the first documented African-American female resident of Evanston. She arrived in Evanston in 1855, at the age of 15, when the Vane family purchased Maria's freedom from slavery. Maria worked for the Vanes as a domestic servant and joined the church they attended: First Church. In 1868 Maria married George Robinson and moved her membership to his church, Second Baptist Church. When she died in 1900, she had requested she be buried with the Vane family. In private, I am tickled to think that "Black Maria" (as the townspeople and parishioners called her) had no idea that in five generations First Church's lead pastor would be "Black Grace" (as the townspeople and parishioners do NOT call me). To be honest, I have no idea what Maria Murray's story means except that knowing of her presence in the First Church's story brought me great comfort this week.

It has been an awful week with the unapologetic grand jury verdict that completely ignored Breonna Taylor who was gunned down in her apartment by police officers. Even as Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's body lay in repose at the Supreme Court, one officer was charged with "wanton endangerment" of a neighboring apartment rendering Breonna's bleeding and dying black body irrelevant and invisible. As a black woman, I have known and refused to acknowledge Malcom X's words that "the most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected

person in America is the black woman." This week I had a second thought.

It was helpful to remember a Parker Palmer story about farmers in the Midwest who would prepare for dangerous blizzards by tying a rope from the back door of their house out to the barn as a guide to ensure they could return safely home. It was known that winter storms came quickly and blew with such a force that a farmer could not see the end of their hand. Disoriented, many wandered in circles, often lost in their own backyards, and froze to death without realizing how close they were to safety (*A Hidden Wholeness*). Apparently, to this day there are parts of Canada and the Great Plains where people still tie one end of a long rope to their house and hold on tightly when they go out.

Remembering Palmer's story led me to think of the importance of tying a spiritual rope to the cross of Jesus as we navigate the blinding blizzard of hate around us. When I think of how to weave the "spiritual rope," Fr. Richard Rohr is helpful in his recommending a spiritual practice that "sets a sentry at the door of your senses" by imposing "a moratorium on exactly how much news you are subject to - hopefully not more than an hour a day of television, social media, internet news, magazine and newspaper commentary, and/or political discussion." Fr. Rohr points out that an inability to "set a sentry at the door of your senses" during these long tumultuous months "will only tear you apart and pull you into the dualistic world of opinion and counter-opinion, not Divine Truth, which is always found in a bigger place." Rohr suggests that we use these next months "for some form of public service, volunteerism, mystical reading from the masters, prayer - or, preferably, all of the above." "After all," he says, "you have much to gain now and nothing to lose. Nothing at all."

Yesterday morning, I ran into Jan at the grocery store. Masked and six feet apart, we exchanged some words of encouragement with the frozen shrimp between us. I told her

that I have decided to be overly generous and overly patient. I have been returning carts that were left in parking lots, I have surrendered a parking spot and I have paid a toll for the vehicle behind me. I have read of people who have paid for groceries and someone who gave money to someone who had taken a break from begging. Navigating through the blizzard, I am holding on to the rope called *Jesus*. I will dare to say that for black women like Maria Murray, Breonna Taylor and myself, communities like First Church of the past, the present and the future can become one of the strands that weave the rope of hope. Or as Richard puts it, we become the womb for Love where God can be born. I don't know what that means, but I like it!

With love,

Pastor Grace

*In God alone is my soul at rest.
God is the source of my hope.
In God I find shelter, my rock, and my safety.
Men are but a puff of wind,
Men who think themselves important are a delusion.
Put them on a scale,
They are gone in a puff of wind.
-Psalm 62:5-9*

Contact

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First United Methodist Church is a community of Christians inviting all people to grow in their relationship with God and to live their faith in the world.

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