

Final Paper
Notes From the Sankofa Journey and Reflections from a *Testament of Hope*

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The Encyclopedia Britannica defines *Social Justice* as the, “fair treatment and equitable status of all individuals and social groups within a state” or society¹. The Bible is very transparent of the reality of discrimination and injustice and seeks to teach Christians that they must turn away from all types of discrimination and fight against it. Throughout the Bible, both in the Old Testament and New Testament, the overarching theme of justice is evident. Those of the Christian faith are even taught that their God is indeed a God of Justice. Verses such as Isaiah 1:17 (NKJV) reminds us to “Learn to do good; Seek justice, rebuke the oppressor, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow” and Psalm 82:3 (NKJV) which call us to “Defend the poor and fatherless; Do justice to the afflicted and the needy. Deliver the poor and needy; Free them from the hand of the wicked”. These verses in addition to many others can be found throughout the pages of the Bible and serve as the genesis for social justice and social movements that are happening today..

These verses with themes about social justice are evident from Genesis to the Book of Revelation. Likewise, there is an overabundance of the theme of the Law and the role that it plays in the context of the Ancient Near East. It is fair to say that there were a plethora of Laws in the Bible and in the world of the Ancient Near East that were profoundly unjust towards different groups of people; women, the unmarried, Prostitutes, Lepers, Tax Collectors and Gentiles. The evidence of injustice towards the many different groups of people in the Bible is evident today but it may look a different way.

Although there were Laws that were unquestionably unjust towards different groups of people, Jesus has his own Laws on love that hope to mitigate the issues of injustice and the need for social justice. ‘Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the

¹ Duignan, B.. "social justice." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 13, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-justice>.

second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39). The message behind this verse is pretty simple; love God and love people; and in that love, standing up for those who are being mistreated or exploited is needed. Jesus was the model of someone that stood up to injustice: Jesus and the adulterous woman in John 8: 2-10, talking with the Samaritan woman in John 4:8-26, his response to the faith of the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28- despite the Laws of the time, Jesus still remained in their presence, extended mercy, listened to them, and even touched them (in cases where it was forbidden or one would be shunned if they touched a certain type of individual).

One might ask what role the church has in social movements? What additional connections exist between the injustice in the Bible and what continues to go on in the world today? What role does the church play in these social movements against social injustice? Now more than ever churches are beginning to stand up and speak up against the fight for social justice. More and more churches are beginning to realize that it is their biblical call to speak out for those that are not being treated fairly; it is their assignment. They are to use the resources that they have in addition to partnering with other community-based organizations to fight and serve alongside them in this fight for social justice.

Leaders in the pulpits can lean more on Scriptural evidence and show their congregations that they are called to speak out against the injustices that they see. Using Martin Luther King’s philosophy on non-violence can serve as a foundation for change. In the same way that Dr. King, a Minister , Rev. Clay Evans, Hosea Williams, Rev. Willie Bolden and other church leaders spoke out, demonstrated, prayed (both publicly and privately) and sacrificed themselves on behalf of others. The same can be done today. His legacy and the work that he and countless others did on behalf of the cause for social justice was not done in vain. The struggle continues

and we are called to stand up and speak out. Despite all, as was said many times during the Sankofa Journey, “Love embraces justice”

Throughout the decades, there have been many social movements that have emerged as a way to combat the social injustices of their times; one such movement is The Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement as defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica was,

“A movement against racial segregation and discrimination in the southern United States that came to national prominence during the mid-1950s. This movement had its roots in the centuries-long efforts of enslaved Africans and their descendants to resist racial oppression and abolish the institution of slavery. Although enslaved people were emancipated as a result of the American Civil War and were then granted basic civil rights through the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S Constitution, struggles to secure federal protection of these rights continued during the next century. Through nonviolent protest, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s broke the pattern of public facilities being segregated by “race” in the South and achieved the most important breakthrough in equal-rights legislation for African Americans since the Reconstruction period (1865–77). Although the passage in 1964 and 1965 of major civil rights legislation was victorious for the movement, by then militant Black activists had begun to see their struggle as a freedom or liberation movement not just seeking civil rights reforms but instead confronting the enduring economic, political, and cultural consequences of past racial oppression”².

Although the definition presented by the Encyclopedia Britannica provides a solid general overview of that period, it does not highlight the key figures that contributed to this Movement that spanned between the 1950’s-1960’s in the South. The Civil Rights Movement has deep roots in the period of Slavery and the after effects of it. The struggle for equal rights for Blacks was the main goal. It was a task that was not easy; there were a myriad of rights that Blacks had to fight for; Intergration of schools, abolishing the Jim Crow”Seperate but Equal” rules, lynchings of blacks, burnings of homes owned by blacks and many other issues that plagued the deep South.

In the midst of all of this, there was one man, with an Army of supporters that would stand as the spokesperson for this Movement. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a young

² Carson, C.. "American civil rights movement." Encyclopedia Britannica, April 17, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/event/American-civil-rights-movement>.

black Minister from Georgia that possessed a gift to not only preach and teach the Word of God, but to move a Nation to see the importance of non-violence despite all of the violence that blacks were being subjected to during that time. Dr. King made powerful speeches, organized non-violence sit-ins, led marches, made appearances on television articulating the need for equal rights for blacks. His philosophy of nonviolence was more than in his words it was in his actions as well. He spoke passionately about why the route of nonviolence, despite the oppression of blacks, would be so much more effective than that of violence. He said,

“Now there are three ways that oppressed people have generally dealt with their oppression. One is the method of acquiescence, the method of surrender; that is, the individuals will somehow adjust themselves to oppression, they adjust themselves to discrimination or to segregation or to colonialism or what have you. The other method that has been used in history is that of rising up against the oppressor with corroding hatred and physical violence. Now of course we know about this method in Western civilization because in a sense it has been the hallmark of its grandeur, and the inseparable twin of western materialism. But there is a weakness in this method because it ends up creating many more social problems than it solves. And I convinced that if the Negro succumbs to the temptation of using violence in his struggle for freedom and justice, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness. And our chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos”³.

The Civil Rights Movement can be directly connected to the experience of injustice in contemporary life. Although there has been progress in the lives of Blacks there remains the struggle for equal rights and fair treatment. One of the major topics currently happening in contemporary life is the death of black and brown men at the hands of Police Officials as well as the horrific treatment and of the conditions of the incarcerated in Prison facilities such as Rikers Island; treatment and conditions that have led many to take their own lives or because of neglect on the part of the jail, have died.

The #Black Lives Matter Movement is a more recent movement that echoes the goals of the Civil Rights Movement and fights for the rights of blacks. After the 2013 death of Trayvon

³ Martin Luther King Jr. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.* New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1986, 44-45.

Martin, the world began to realize what was happening to the lives of young black and brown boys and men; something had to be done. As the blacklivesmatter.com website states, #BlackLivesMatter was founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer. Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. is a global organization in the US, UK, and Canada, whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes. By combating and countering acts of violence, creating space for Black imagination and innovation, and centering Black joy, we are winning immediate improvements in our lives"⁴.

In the same way that Blacks were enslaved, today there is mass incarceration. Both black and brown men are given unfair trials, and are forced to wait months or even years for their cases to be heard while they wait in jail. In the same way that blacks were being lynched and tortured by whites, members of the Ku Klux Klan, many one can assume held positions in the Police or Sheriff's Departments.

Today, although blacks are not being lynched, many have died at the hands of Police Officials and have gotten away with murder or had to serve little time similar to what happened during the Civil Rights Movement. The norm has become that after a Police Official is tried for the death or beating of a black man, they would get acquitted. It is the sad reality and the sad truth. There is a lack of accountability. Cases such as: Rodney King, Abner Luima, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Micheal Brown in addition to countless others that have not made the front pages of the newspapers are echoes of the deaths that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement; the innocent lives that were lost. It is essentially the same thing but looks a little different; it is covered up much better so as to avoid accountability.

⁴ *Black Lives Matter: About Us*, <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>, (accessed on April 21, 2023).

Society has seemed to accept and be used to the deaths of innocent black men and women; it has become the norm.

The course Leadership Development in the Urban Church has been a course unlike any course I have taken at Alliance Theological Seminary. It was a course that revealed to me my true identity; my roots; the story of my Ancestors. Before I took this course I have to admit that my knowledge of African American history and the plight for freedom has been limited to the all too familiar and repeated stories of Martin Luther King, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks and Malcolm X.

I realized that my limited knowledge of my own history was due to the education that I have received; from elementary school all the way to my years in college. We were always taught the same things about the same people. Sure, we learned that Slavery did exist and then Abraham Lincoln came along and freed the Slaves and things went on from there. Then we learned about the Civil Rights Movement and the Freedom Riders and the Ku Klux Klan; that was pretty much as far as it went.

If that was all I was ever taught, then that was all I ever knew. I wasn't encouraged by Teachers to dig deep and further research topics about my history. As a High School Teacher, I understand the pressure to complete and cover a curriculum in a short amount of time; but it was evident that throughout my education, my Teachers did not feel the need to spend more time on African American history.

In retrospect, I realize how incredibly messed up that was! I have heard throughout the years that schools do not want to teach the true story of African American history. They do not want to teach about the Rebellions that occurred during the Middle Passage. They want to paint a picture of Africans that willingly went; did not put up a fight when they were savagely taken from

their land. These were Africans! Warriors that fought with spears and handmade weapons; strong, muscular individuals that were proud of their land and who they were. The question still remains as to why the educational system does not want to know about our history.

As a High School English Literature Teacher, servicing black and brown students who are over-aged, under-credited and come from difficult home environments, I now understand what my assignment is. Before the Sankofa Journey, even *during* the Sankofa Journey, I was the English Teacher that always taught texts and showed movies about the Holocaust. Painting a picture for my students of this period of history was very important to me; perhaps the fact that both the School Principal and Assistant Principal are both Jewish has something to do with it.

I have led discussions and answered questions that students have about the Holocaust; I watched them turn away and gasp when they view photographs of the conditions that the prisoners were subjected to or the piles of bodies waiting to be thrown into a mass grave. I have wept while showing Steven Spielberg's masterpiece, *Schindler's List*, a film that I have seen dozens of times.

As I continued to learn about MY roots during the Sankofa Journey, I could not help but feel tremendous guilt and shame. I could not help but feel these emotions because I realized that in many ways in the eleven plus years that I have been teaching, I have failed my students. I could have been that Teacher that taught them about their Ancestors and revealed to them their own identity. In many ways, I was doing the very same thing that I faulted my own Teachers for doing all of these years- not telling the true story; not acknowledging our history.

In my School we have a teaching staff of about twelve Teachers, three of which are Black in a school population that is predominantly black and brown. I have been doing them a disservice by not teaching and researching curriculum about the struggle of African Americans.

As we went through each site during the Sankofa Journey, I could not help but feel an overwhelming sense of emotional exhaustion but at the same time a great sense of pride of the people that came before me. The amount of resilience and pride in who they were; their fearlessness in face of danger is honorable to say the least.

My heart broke as we slowly walked through the watery grave. I would never have imagined that millions of my people died during the Middle Passage; before this trip I did not even know what the Middle Passage even was! The thought that the bones of my Ancestors still lie and the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean is haunting and sickening to me. This is what my students need to learn about; they need to know the story from the very beginning up until what is going on now with Mass Incarceration.

Before Sankofa, I NEVER made the connection “From Slavery to Mass Incarceration”. It was a grand revelation for me, making that connection. My mind was blown away and I began to become angrier and angrier at how this could even be allowed today. Despite everything my Ancestors, the figures of the Civil Rights Movement and Freedom Riders, the struggle still continues. The same things are happening but they just look a different way so as to not be so obvious.

After experiencing the range of emotions during the Sankofa Journey and walking away with a greater sense of pride in being a “Sistah” could not have come at a better time. I have a renewed sense of pride in all things Black and my mentality is like that of actress Issa Rae who during the Emmys red carpet interview said, “I’m rooting for everybody Black”. I could not have been more prouder to black than after the Sankofa Journey. I not only know who I am and where I come from, but I am encouraged in knowing that the same courage and resilience and

fearlessness that flowed through my Ancestors veins, flows through mine and as the saying on the tee-shirts say, “I am indeed my Ancestors wildest dreams!”

So after the Sankofa Journey, everyone I met, discussions I had, sites I saw, things I read and emotions I felt, the question now is “So now what?”. How am I going to apply what I have learned to my context; my context as a Teacher and as future Army Chaplain? My context in this sense, is both my personal life and my role as a New York City Public School Teacher. Individually, I have work to do; a spark has been lit, a seed planted and I am hungry to learn more and more. Sankofa was just the beginning of a lifelong experience of learning about my roots.

As a future Army Chaplain, I will continue to think about how my Sankofa experience can apply to my future Ministry. I know of one Chaplain that attended Sankofa and will reach out to her to see what she is doing, how she is implementing what we learned in mer Ministry. I;m sure that much can be done. As an Army Chaplain, I know there are limitations to what I can do and as I continue to go through my training, I will learn what those limitations are.

As a Teacher, I clearly understand my Assignment. All of this was not by chance; it was not a coincidence; I was meant to attend the Sankofa Journey for such a time as this. As mentioned before, the starting point is my individual research and study; before I teach it to my students, I need to first teach myself! As I continue to learn more, I will begin building an entire curriculum modeling the Sankofa experience- building a curriculum that takes my students from “Slavery to Mass Incarceration”.

I want them to experience what I experienced; I want them to connect the dots and come to the realization that although progress and gains have been met, there is still so much to do; so much that we need to fight for. I want them to see that education is something that was fought for

and there was a time when we could not be in a classroom; they need to understand the genesis of that; learn about the Slave experience and the goal of the white man to keep the Slave from learning to read and receiving any kind of education.

My first steps toward that is by teaching the text *Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington. It is a perfect example of the hunger and passion that one young boy had to receive education; a young boy who compared receiving an education to “paradise”. Teaching this book to my students is just the beginning. I will continue to do my own individual research as I work to build the curriculum, “*From Slavery to Mass Incarceration*”. It will take time but I know that if I continue to teach future generations our story, we will not let the story die. In the same way that those of the Jewish faith continue to speak of the Holocaust to the world, “do not forget”, the same should apply for the story of black people; a story so rooted in our history that it can no longer be denied or minimized. It is a story that must be told and must continue to be told so that the world “does not forget”.

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