

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

Machias, Maine

May 16, 2021

Another Way

Rev. Susie Maxwell

Let us pray . . .

Many of you more seasoned Centre Streeters know that our church's first pastor was Rev. James Lyon. In fact, one of our beautiful stained glass windows has a dedication to him which reads: "In memory of Rev. James Lyon, A Noble Patriot, A Faithful Minister, A Good Man, and Full of the Holy Ghost."

Rev. Lyons was ordained by the Presbytery of New Brunswick, New Jersey in 1764. He originally preached in Nova Scotia, Canada where he had been given a land grant by the English. He arrived here in Machias in 1771 and was considered quite a patriot. For example, in June of 1775, he wrote a letter to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, requesting help, telling of Machias' capture of a threatening British schooner and the subsequent battle in which four died and 11 were wounded.

This was just before the Revolution started, but the British had been trying to stir trouble for some time. Not long after, he sent another letter to the Provincial Congress, urging the invasion of Nova Scotia, because American residents living there were being forced to swear allegiance to the king.

Then during the American Revolution, Rev. Lyons became a local hero when rebels learned that the British planned to attack the town during

church because all the men folk would be worshipping. So the rebels tipped Rev. Lyon's off and he let the men bring their guns to church while another man watched for the approaching British.

When the signal was given that the British were coming, the men grabbed their guns, leaving the service to fight. However, the British won and took over the town, cutting off all supplies. As a result, the invaded town couldn't afford to pay Rev. Lyons and he received no salary for several years, but he kept serving despite struggling financially. Some say he dug clams in order for his family to survive. Rev. Lyons was also responsible for setting the Maine-Canada border after the war. The original plan was to make the border about 100 miles west of Machias, which would have then become part of Canada. But thanks to his letters of appeal, we have the present border.

To ease his financial burdens, Rev. Lyons took a job as an interim pastor in Newtown in 1783 because they too were recovering from the

Revolution since the British had destroyed the prior church sanctuary. So he re-gathered what remained of the congregation and rebuilt the next church, which became known as the Old White Church. But he stayed for only two years because he wanted to return to his beloved Machias. Unfortunately, his old congregation still could not pay him as they'd become deprived of income sources.

Rev. Lyons died on October 12, 1794, still unpaid. After his death, with things finally improving, Machias raised money to give to his children. Rev. Lyons, he really was A Noble Patriot, A Faithful Minister, A Good Man, and Full of the Holy Ghost.

With thanks to Alan Kryszak's research for his new film "Privacy & the Power of Secrets" about a lost village founded by a black veteran of the Revolutionary War, I share the following: London Atus was born in 1759 in Newark, New Jersey. He was born of slaves and was a slave himself

— right here in Machias. London Atus was brought here from Nova Scotia in 1771 by his owner, our own founder, Rev. James Lyons.

Four years later, Atus fought against the British in the Battle of the Margarettta on June 11 & 12, 1775 — the same battle I mentioned earlier that Lyons fought in with 4 dead and 11 wounded. After defending our developing nation, Atus used his veteran's pay to purchase his freedom from Rev. Lyons.

Because love is love, Atus married a local white woman, Eunice Foss, and in 1790, they founded the first interracial settlement in Downeast, Maine. Six households originally formed the town. The Civil War period (1861-65) marked the highest population of Atusville as a refuge for escaped slaves via the Underground Railroad: there was a tunnel from the Machias River right to the hill at Court Street & Broadway.

Despite being a sanctuary of sorts, this community was never accepted or integrated, so they could not thrive and in the 1960s, Harley Henry — the last descendent of the original Atusville families — passed away.

Marcus LiBrizzi's book "Lost Atusville" written about this community, describes them as "A community separated, even in death, from the mainstream." Atusville never belonged to Machias proper and was kept on the outskirts in all dealings.

Whitneyville local Nathan Pennell — who is the current water manager of that town — met Harley Henry as a child and you can hear Nathan's narration on Alan's film.

I'm trying to imagine Rev. Lyons preaching from Galatians — the verses Lynne read for us — especially verse 28 *There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are*

all one in Christ Jesus, while London Atus sat listening in our original Congregational church from his pew designated for the black people.

While some of us might be shocked that our founding Pastor was a slave owner while preaching the Good News and we like to think that we would not have been like him, the truth is, the norms of any culture is shaped by domination. And, the things of this world have a way of shaping pretty much most of us into people we like to think we are not. So that means that as much as I like to think I'd have been different from Rev. Lyons? I don't know that back then, Rev. Maxwell would have been. Pretty much most of us get caught up the dominant forces of our culture across its history. And we are either the benefactors or the victims of the things of this world.

Lynne read from one of Paul's most passionate letters which was written to the churches scattered throughout Galatia (a portion of modern Turkey). It's one of his most critical writings establishing the

importance of Grace (as represented by Christianity) compared to the Law (as represented by Judaism). In other words, the conflict Paul's addressing involves a deep disagreement over what matters most in life and in relationship to God.

Judaism, like Christianity, was a religion of grace, in which the Jews demonstrated and expressed (but did not earn) their salvation through "works of the Law." Paul did not conceive of Christianity as replacing Judaism, but as fulfilling *the promises* of Judaism for the sake of the whole world through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Remember, this is the same Paul who was once Saul, the zealous persecutor of the early Christians until he had his OMG moment on the road to Damascus.

Biblical scholar John Frederick writes that Paul's aim is to focus us on the transition from the incomplete to the complete, from the covenant in progress for a time through the Law, to the covenant perfected for all time through Jesus Christ.

You might say that Paul's aim was to present how a life in Christ can show humanity another way — A way other than our own and a way that can save us from the illusion that we belong to one side or the other — a system that domination thrives on.

That other way is our faith because our faith challenges us to change our world view.

I'm reading Aaron White's 2020 publication "Recovering: From Brokenness and Addiction to Blessedness and Community" and in it he references one of the most hopeful and realistic words I've read in a long time from pastor and activist Laurel Dykstra: "A system based on domination cannot be fixed, but we can offer alternatives. Winning is not the over throw of empire: (winning) is any action that suggests the empire is not the only way."

Our Scripture this morning tells us that EACH of us belongs as one and to One, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, rich or poor, young or old, binary or non binary, smart or dull, left or right, it goes on and on and on — and that greater something — which many of us call God — really does empower us to offer alternatives other than domination, it empowers us to offer alternatives that are in service to the things of God which is the identity and place where as people of faith we trust we came from and trust we are all held. We can find Paul’s reconfiguration through the life-giving and soul-saving ways that our participation in the life and the body of the Church offer. I’m sure Rev. Lyons and London Atus both believed that with all their hearts — they fought together to defeat the British and defend religious freedom. And still, Lyons was on one side of the system and London Atus on the other.

This journey toward perfect union as represented in Christ is not easy. Domination is powerfully seductive. But if we truly believe that the

good news is for everybody, then until it is everybody's, the good news remained unfulfilled and in competition with domination.

I know that sounds overwhelming.

But beloveds, as people of faith, the best we can do is pray for, listen for and follow God's voice. Another way of saying that is the best we can do is pray for, listen for and create another way.

Sometimes we'll get it wrong. Because sometimes we'll be caught up in domination where we have blind sides, exhaustion, complacency or many other whatevers that keep us from finding another way.

It is — as many a journeyer says — 3 steps forward and 2 steps back.

But don't let that stop you because at any given moment, we're also the ones writing history and the good news has many dimensions and when

we work with it then mercifully and blessedly, we'll find what matters most in life and in relationship to God.

My prayer for you as we begin this new week is that because of our oneness in Christ, you trust, believe and act on that power to help find another way.

Amen.