The Impact of “Roots” 40 Years Later

By Anne Latimer

... no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Philemon 1:16

We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine.

1 Timothy 1:9-10

Snatched from his homeland and sold into the American slave trade in 1765 at age 15, a young Kunta Kinte, brave and defiant, remained forever rooted to his African heritage. Despite the harrowing experience of slavery, Kunta Kinte stayed true to who he was and from where he came, never really relinquishing his African name, even though he endured a savage beating to force him to acquiesce to the slave name, Tobey. Kunta Kinte’s story and family name, sounding like a proud warrior, forged an undying legacy that went through his lineage.

January 23, 2017, marked 40 years since our country witnessed the saga of Kunta Kinte and his descendants in what is now considered a landmark television event in the miniseries, “Roots”, based on Alex Haley’s novel, Roots: the Saga of an American Family. The series became a national phenomenon when it aired in January 1977.

The personal rather than academic tragedy of Kunta Kinte and his descendants had a profound impact and lasting significance in the African American community. We took pride in the strength, courage, and core dignity of Kunta Kinte and his family. Hence, Kunta Kinte – the central character and Haley’s maternal fourth great-grandfather – became our hero.

In honor of Black History Month, several church members shared their reflections and memories of the 1977 program. They seem to agree that “Roots” changed the nation’s consciousness and opened up conversation about our shared history.

Although Deaconess Cheryl Bridges was a mere 11-years-old when “Roots” aired, she recalled that it shaped her life in a way that no television program did. “It seemed to open a dialogue within my family about race relations that I had never experienced before,” Bridges said. “It also developed a much greater interest amongst family members in our genealogy.”
Sis. Mary Mims-Smith remembered that the series “opened my eyes vividly to the disturbing story of Kunta Kinte and his family’s struggles” in slavery. Mims-Smith found it difficult to watch the subjection of Kunta Kinte and his family to “so much physical brutality, mental abuse, and sexual violence.” She said the ripple effects of this treatment had an impact on our history as a people, right into the prejudices of today. “I thank God for our strong roots. Our strength is what keeps us going day in and day out, despite the injustices that we face.”

For Sis. Dedra Mattox Jones, then a high-school student in West Virginia, watching the drama unfold on television was a memorable, but traumatic experience. “Not having had any Black history studies,” she said, “I found it entertaining, informative, and heartbreaking. The fact that people were treated as though they were less than human really disturbed me.” Watching the series was so horrific for Mattox Jones that she had nightmares. “I had to stop watching it,” she said.

“Roots” obviously delivered an education about slavery and about its cost to humans. “The harshness and gruesome treatment of Kunta Kinte was frequent and profoundly intense,” noted Deacon Eugene H. Preston, Jr., who pointed out that “much of this brutal treatment resulted from Kunta Kinte’s courageous attempts to retain and practice his African tradition.” Deacon Preston said the TV series lead to a significant increase in racial awareness and pride among African Americans of all ages. He also witnessed a major increase in researching and establishing family genealogy among many Americans of various nationalities, a greater appreciation and expansion of African American history in education, and the availability of more publications about African Americans and African tradition.

“The television series shocked the nations,” declared Deacon Jim Lockhart, who befriended Haley a few years before the release of book, when both men were instructors in the State University of New York system. “The program was one of the first to give us a sense of the brutality, mistreatment, and dehumanization of slavery,” said Lockhart. I thought I knew about African-American history,” Lockhart continued, but “‘Roots’ was a vivid and explosive exposé of slavery from a humanistic perspective that we had never seen before. Alex brought it to light,” he said, crediting his friend, and noting that that the TV series propelled the book into a best seller.

Haley was surprised by the impact of the series and the book, according to Lockhart. “They both showed the bravery and endurance of our people,” Lockhart said. “The theme of ‘We Shall Overcome Someday’ was reflected through moral, mental, and physical strength of Kunta Kinte and his family. We sensed they would overcome and be okay,” he said.

We can all take pride in this truth: Our people not only survived but also triumphed over the dehumanizing horrors of slavery.