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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Matthew 22: 34-40; Revelation 7: 9, 13-17
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Souls Growing Deeper Still: The Legacy of the Black Social Gospel in the 21st Century

"I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas…From out the caves of evening…I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come graciously, with no scorn or condescension."

So says W.E.B. Du Bois in his monumental classic, *The Souls of Black Folk*. One of the surprising gifts that emerged from our journey to Africa last month has been a deeper engagement with the work of Du Bois. Du Bois died in Ghana, and he's buried there alongside his wife Shirley. We didn't have the opportunity to visit his house or his grave on our journey, but if we ever return, I'll insist that Du Bois be an essential part of our visit to Ghana. To my embarrassment, it was only as we were on the verge of leaving the city that I recalled that Du Bois had died there. We had lots of other things on our minds by then, and the remainder of our days in Africa were also very full. But I kicked myself, for Du Bois was a crucial link between North America and Ghana. So many great intellectuals and artists from the US have flooded into Ghana over the years - MLK and Malcolm X visited, as did Louis Armstrong, Muhammed Ali, Maya Angelou, and many others. But Du Bois was at the center of that exchange, choosing to live in Ghana for the last three years of his life. How could I have forgotten that important connection? It's something I've been trying to rectify, if only in my own mind, ever since we've returned. Today, I'd like to tell you a little of what I've discovered these last four or five weeks. Some of it has been a matter of review, but I've learned a whole lot that was new to me. In his life and in his writings, Du Bois offers some powerful lessons that I think we all need to contend with. In particular, Du Bois helps to clarify the importance of the Pilgrimage for Peace, calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, that several of us are participating in this week.

The first thing I want to emphasize about Du Bois is his origin. He grew up right here in New England, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts of all places. He is, in many ways, as much a New England writer as Mark Twain and Harriet Beecher Stowe, though he had a cosmopolitan soul that led him all around the world, until he finally settled in Accra. There in Great Barrington, he even attended a Congregational Church throughout his early years, a church not wholly unlike this one. Like yet another New England writer, Emily Dickinson, he had a contested relationship with the church for the remainder of his life, and he even called himself an atheist by the end, but you can sense the traces of religion throughout many of his writings, especially *The Souls of Black Folk*, his most famous book. Whatever he thought of God, Du Bois never lost touch with the prophetic possibilities of religion. And he never lost touch with the passion of Jesus, which continued to inspire him long after he became frustrated with the church.

I would argue that almost everything Du Bois did and said can be understood through the prism of a certain reading of religion. In particular, it all flows from an understanding of our two Scripture lessons for the morning. On the one hand, the entirety of Du Bois's writing, so far as I can tell, can be understood as an attempt to come to terms with what it means to love one's neighbor as oneself, especially in an era of racial apartheid and empire. On the other hand, Du

Bois worked to build a vision of human flourishing not unlike the one we find in Revelation, for all of those who have suffered what that book refers to as "the ordeal." Did you notice that word when the passage was read? The ordeal can be understood in many ways - the ordeal of following in the ways of a nonviolent Jewish peasant in the face of a ruthless empire in the first and second centuries; the ordeal of surviving the legacies of the Middle Passage or Jim Crow terror; the ordeal of colonial rule in Africa; or perhaps in a more contemporary vein, the ordeal of living under one catastrophe after another in Gaza and the West Bank. Du Bois became skeptical of churches, but he never lost touch with the prophetic strand that he inherited from his early exposure to the church. If Du Bois could sometimes hurl invectives at churches, that was because, far too often, he saw them failing to uphold the best parts of their tradition, those parts that pull us out of our narrowness, those parts that pull us out of our dogmatism, and those parts that pull us out of our self-interest, in the name of a love encompassing all of humanity. Du Bois became more and more secular throughout his life, but that shouldn't obscure the ways he continued to uphold the religious tradition he had inherited as a child.

It's something we all might do well to recall - our children may or may not retain a lasting commitment to this thing called church. I really hope they do, because there's something that happens here that doesn't happen in most of the other places I know. Here, we're connected to a community. We're oriented toward something that transcends our material and our economic lives. And we're rooted in a spiritual and ethical tradition with roots that are thousands of years old. I hope we don't disappoint our children, the way Du Bois was disappointed by the churches in his own day. But I also hope we can trust that regardless of what decisions they come to make regarding the life of faith, what we can impart and embody here just might have the power to shape and to guide them for the rest of their days, however they come to organize the world.

Here's another thing I want you to see. Everything that happened in the Civil Rights Movement flowed out of and through Du Bois. Everything that has followed in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, including the Pilgrimage for Peace, also flows from Du Bois.

He was born immediately after the Civil War, in 1867, just after slavery had formally ended. He died 95 years later, on August 27, 1963. For those of you who know your history, you'll recall that that was the day just before the March on Washington. Almost nothing was said about the death of Du Bois at the March. There was a reluctant moment of silence offered in his honor, and a few words were spoken, but few of those in attendance recalled that the March had been Du Bois's own idea, 60 years earlier. And no one noted that it was Du Bois who, more than anyone else, laid the intellectual groundwork not only for that event, but for the Freedom Movement that we call, all too restrictively I think, the Civil Rights Movement. Long before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus, Du Bois had been the movement's major architect. He did it through the founding the Niagara Movement in 1905 - it was one of the most powerful antecedents of the Freedom Movement of the 50's and 60's. He did it through the founding of the NAACP in 1909. And he did it through a concept that he first articulated in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, called "double consciousness."

I'm going to get a little wonky here for a bit, but it's important. For Du Bois, double consciousness had to do with holding two conflicting realities in one's identity at one and the same time. It meant being both Black and being American. It meant critiquing white civilization while also affirming the best intellectual currents within that civilization. It meant existing as one who felt alien within America, while also taking his rightful place as a constitutive member of that wider American culture. That wasn't a mark of confusion for Du Bois. Rather, it was an

affirmation of the complexity roiling within himself, and roiling within the Black Americans he was writing about. There are ways in which double consciousness was still too confining, and the concept has been critiqued since Du Bois gave voice to it. But it was a decisive formulation that charted a course toward 1963 and beyond.

You see, in the years prior to Du Bois's formulation, the movement for Black Freedom had been pulled in a number of different directions. Frederick Douglass had died in 1895, and there was no obvious successor. Increasingly, people were pulled into two conflicting directions: that of social uplift and integration, represented by Booker T. Washington, and that of withdrawal and separatism, represented by Marcus Garvey. Washington sat atop a political and fundraising juggernaut at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He made himself a favorite among the wealthiest industrialists of the day, and he advocated a program of advancement through the pursuit of economic gains, while sidelining any discussion of political or human rights for African Americans. Garvey, on the other hand, believed that it was impossible for black people to live unmolested among white society, and so he started a separatist movement, advocating that African Americans return to Africa. Now, neither Washington nor Garvey were wholly wrong, but they were both conservative in orientation, meaning that they left intact the prevailing condition of the United States at that moment, which was Jim Crow terror.

Now here comes Du Bois. His notion of double consciousness bridged those two tendencies, suggesting that it wasn't necessary to choose between integration on one hand, and liberation on the other. Both impulses could exist at one and the same time within the same individual, and within the same social movement. That may sound simple to us, but in 1903, that concept was revolutionary. And it was that very admission that gave many Black churches the courage to begin working for structural change within the culture of the United States, forging a distinct Black social gospel. According to Gary Dorrien, who has written the best account of that era (and who, you might remember, has spoken from this pulpit), prior to Du Bois, most Black churches felt pulled in one or another of those two directions - moral uplift or separatism. The generation of progressive spiritual leaders that came of age in the 1940's and 50's - King, Abernathy, Shuttlesworth, Lewis, and all the rest - they had all drunk deeply from the wells that Du Bois had spent decades digging. They were all the inheritors of Du Bois' notion of a double consciousness, which, to shift metaphors, provided much of the oxygen for the Freedom Movement of the 50's and 60's. You couldn't see it exactly, but it was everywhere in the air. In fact, it was the air.[1]

That notion is important for those of us who are white, and who come out of churches such as this one. We too need to learn how to embrace a double consciousness, but also a triple, quadruple, quintuple consciousness. For a lot of us, that's something we will have to cultivate. Many of us have been made to feel all along that this land was made for you and me, and so we need to cultivate within ourselves other perspectives that help to widen our aperture to the world. Certainly if we're white, it means cultivating a double consciousness with regard to the African American experience. But it's not only white folks who need to be doing this. All of us as Christians need to be doing it with regard for our Jewish brothers and sisters, and our Muslim brothers and sisters, and with our Palestinian brothers and sisters. All of us as North Americans are called to create a double consciousness with regard to our African brothers and sisters. If

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[1] See Gary Dorrien, "Recovering the Black Social Gospel," printed in the Harvard Divinity Bulletin, Summer/Autumn 2015. That article was adapted from Dorrien's book *The New Abolition: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). The insights from the preceding paragraphs on Washington and Garvey are drawn from Dorrien.

we're straight we're trying to do it with our gay and lesbian and trans brothers and sisters, and if we're men we're trying to cultivate that double consciousness in our relationship with women. In other words, what Du Bois articulated with double consciousness has expanded to include the necessity of forging a human consciousness. That, I believe, is the work of religion these days. It's what Jesus meant, in the fullest sense, when he talked about loving one's neighbor. And it's what we're marching toward Washington this week to proclaim.

But why, given the amazing legacy of Du Bois, was he more or less shunned at the 1963 March? The answer is complicated. In the years following World War II, Du Bois became more sharply critical of the United States. But he also became more forthright in his commitment to economic justice, and in his critiques of global capitalism. For Du Bois, it became more and more clear that it wasn't racism in the abstract that was the root of the problem. Rather, racism had been invented in order to justify the rapacious drive of capital - including the slave trade, but also including the plundering of the African and Asian and American continents. In other words, he believed that the European powers knew exactly what they were doing, and that at some level everyone knew it was wrong, so much so that a system of racial classification had to be invented that allowed them to act with impunity and to treat African and indigenous populations as sub-human. Well, in the McCarthy era, that didn't go down well. Come to think of it, it doesn't go down well in this era either. But in the 50's, it led to greater and greater pressure upon Du Bois, until at last he accepted an invitation from Ghana's President, Kwame Nkrumah, to take up residence in that country.

Du Bois's insights do sometimes sting. And many thought that he made some errors in judgment at the toward the end of his life. That was certainly true for those at the March on Washington. Du Bois remained unbowed, and uncompromising. Even so, several months before the March, he wrote the organizers a letter. Here is what he said: "Always I have been uplifted by the thought that what I have done well will live long and justify my life," he wrote. "What I have done ill or never finished can now be handed on to others for endless days to be finished better than perhaps I could have done."[2]

I want to return, at last, to August 28, 1963, the day following Du Bois's death. There was a brief moment of silence in Washington, but across the globe in Ghana, a demonstration coinciding with the March took place outside the US embassy. When it concluded, throngs of people made their way to Du Bois's house to pay their respects. Thousands of people passed through. The following day, Du Bois was given a state funeral. His coffin was driven through the streets, and thousands upon thousands lined up along the roads to send him off - this child of New England, who went on to become an international leader in the freedom movement - in Accra they all came out to honor Du Bois. Every country that had an embassy in Ghana sent a representative to honor Du Bois - every country except one. The United States sent no one.

When they laid him in his grave, a hymn was played. Du Bois was no longer religious, at least not in any conventional way. But when they laid him to rest, near to a place a slave dungeon once stood, the old hymn by Isaac Watts was sung, "Our God Our Help in Ages Past."

They might have included any number of other songs, not the least of which would have been one of the Spirituals that Du Bois had written about so eloquently. But it was a hymn written by an 18th century British Congregationalist that was ultimately chosen. I don't know if it was Du Bois who made the selection. But there in Accra, it seemed to be Du Bois returning to

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[2] As quoted in an article on Du Bois from New African Magazine, December 3, 2013, entitled "W.E.B. Du Bois: The Father of Modern Pan-Africanism?" The insights that follow were taken from that article. See: https://newafricanmagazine.com/4091/

his Congregational roots. It seemed to be a final reconciling gesture. "I sit with Shakespeare, and he winces not," Du Bois had said. It is as though he extended that impulse even at the end. "Even after everything, even at the end, still, I sit with Isaac Watts," Du Bois seemed to say. "And neither he nor I wince."

Let that be our mantra too. Let us sit with Du Bois, confident that he shall welcome our attention. Let us sit with him, confident that neither he nor we have need to wince. And let us learn from his long journey from New England to Africa.

Let's conclude by singing that great hymn that sent Du Bois off into the undiscovered country: Our God, Our Help in Ages Past, hymn #80.