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### Wheels of Justice: Stories from the Deep North, Part I

Some twenty years ago, Paul Thomas Anderson released the film *Magnolia*, which followed a series of characters across several days. Two of those individuals, a younger woman and an older man, are struggling with inner demons whose source we can't quite name. Whatever is happening inside of them is driving them toward various kinds of self-destructive behaviors. It's clear they somehow know each other, but it isn't clear how. But toward the end of the film there's a moment of truth-telling, in which it emerges that there had been a pattern of abuse and denial perpetrated against the woman by the older man. It becomes clear that the source of the woman's inner turmoil, which manifests in substance abuse and an inability to maintain lasting relationships, is rooted in a trauma which had never been fully addressed or acknowledged. In a crucial moment, the camera focuses upon words attached to her bedroom mirror, words that, evidently, she had placed there in order to maintain her sanity. The words are: "But it did happen."

I want to use those words to introduce the project that we've been working on for the past six months. It's a project that we've chosen to call "Wheels of Justice: Stories from the Deep North." After the murder of George Floyd and the racial reckoning that followed, I began going back to older sources having to do with civil rights and also those having to do with the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Much of what I explored pertained especially to the South, an area I've come to know a little over the past several years, an area that many of us explored together four and a half years ago on our first Wheels of Justice journey. But the more I read, and the more I listened, the more it became clear that there were stories that needed to be told in our own backyard – and I mean that pretty literally. There's a story that needs to be told in my backyard, which I'll tell you one day soon. And so I began to unearth stories of racial injustice, and sometimes bold resistance, throughout New England, but especially in Southern New England, in Connecticut and Rhode Island. Mary Tomassetti became my companion on this journey. We spent a lot of days driving around Southern New England, talking to people about the project, sometimes receiving encouragement about it, and sometimes being told that we weren't welcome. And then we enlisted some friends to help us tell the stories on video. Some of those friends you'll know. Some will be new to you. But they're all committed to sharing these stories, insisting, with the movie *Magnolia*, "But it did happen."

Wheels of Justice: Stories from the Deep North will be a multi-week sermon series, a virtual tour of the spaces around us. We're interested in the "it" in the statement, "it did happen." We're concerned to establish what happened around us, because it's been occluded, hidden, for too long. But we're also interested in the "where" of it all, which is to say, the places in which the "it" or the "what" occurred. Almost none of the spaces we visited was marked, and yet there are things that took place all around us that we need to reckon with. If there was a marking, it was a whitewashed version of the story that omitted any mention of slavery, or ethnic cleansing – which happened here. Many are spaces you probably know, or have driven past – in Old Lyme and Deep River, in Mystic and New London, and other places like it. I conceive of this virtual journey over the next several weeks as a project of expressive geography, using space, the places we know and inhabit, to instruct us about forgotten lives, forgotten truths, and

about our moral obligations to those stories. Expressive geography is a way of allowing ourselves to inhabit the world around us differently. I want you to be haunted by what you learn here. And I want the spaces you inhabit to become haunted as well. Every time you drive by them, or visit a restaurant nearby, or stroll through one of the places we visit, I want you to be reminded, voluntarily or otherwise, “But it did happen.” Here, not somewhere else. In New England, not somewhere in the Deep South. I want us all to reckon with what it means to inhabit something called “the Deep North.”

Today, we’ll be hearing from two friends. Carolyn Wakeman will explore a familiar site here in Old Lyme that was once a space of enslavement, and then we’ll head out to Mystic, where a new friend named Michael Kickingbear Johnson will share the history of ethnic cleansing that allowed our colonial ancestors to build homes and communities along the Connecticut Shoreline.

I hope you’ll come along on this Wheels of Justice journey through the Deep North. And I hope you’ll be changed by it. Let’s join Carolyn now.

## Conclusion

But it did happen. But it did happen. Prince and Jenny. Nancy. Jack, Temperance and Jane, here in Old Lyme. But it did happen. 400 hundred or more slaughtered in Mystic. But it did happen. We need to reckon with those words, now more than ever. Where there has been trauma, it becomes immeasurably worse when it is denied, when it is ignored, and when it is forgotten. By contrast, what healing is possible can only occur by telling the stories, by listening, and by having our hearts become a little broken. What healing is possible can only come by insisting, “But it did happen.” That’s why we need these stories from the Deep North.

I’ll close this first segment of our Wheels of Justice journey by referring to our Scripture lesson for the day. The book of Ephesians tells us that we must no longer be children, tossed about by this or that deception, this or that spin, this or that lie or half-truth. Its instruction is that we must come to maturity. Maturity is the ability to reckon with hard truths, to withstand painful revelations, and to do so without shrinking or hiding. Maturity, in the sense that Paul means it in Ephesians, is to recognize our connections to other people, especially those who have too often been invisible to us. It is to say, we have too often not heard what you were telling us. But we’re trying to listen. That’s what it means to be joined and knit together in love. We’re trying to listen to these stories from the Deep North, such that we too can learn to put away falsehood, whitewashing, and begin to speak honestly to ourselves and our neighbors. Amen.