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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: Psalm 137
February 7, 2021

Wheels of Justice: Stories from the Deep North, Part III

Picture first a boy, not yet out of high school, standing on the edge of the Atlantic. He is in West Africa, at the final place that thousands of kidnapped people would have seen of that continent, their home. The place he is standing is a fortress, a prison, one used to hold those captives prior to being crammed aboard sailing vessels that would take them half a world away. The boy stands for a long time, contemplating that vast expanse of ocean, and how the journey of those ships would have led first to one of several islands in the Caribbean, thereafter to fan out across the Americas. He absorbs the dank condition of the holding cells, and he stares at the tiny door through which those captives would have been shoved as they exited the fort, moved toward the ships. He doesn't speak, nor does anyone that he is with. There are no words. Still, the images, the feelings, the visceral shock of the scene, stay with him, kernels and seeds that continue to grow.

When the boy returns to the United States, he struggles to convey what he has seen, what he has felt, even to himself. Most of his teachers, to say nothing of his friends, express little real interest in what he has witnessed. None of them, really, are equipped to process the enormity of that gruesome fortress on the edge of the Atlantic and what it means. In time, the boy comes to understand that his experience upon his return is endemic in the United States, and perhaps throughout most of the Americas. A proper language, together with memorials that teach the truth of what occurred here, simply don't exist – these things don't exist here. Whereas on one side of the Atlantic, a slave fort told a story of what had once occurred there, on the opposite side of the Atlantic, it was as though nothing much had happened at all. The spaces in which the captives, the enslaved, would have arrived here, and lived here, and worked here, have become vacation resorts and shopping districts, the memory erased. It was as though a kind of amnesia was at work, where language, stories, to say nothing of humanity, was simply vacated. And so the boy's inability to absorb the enormity of what he had been shown, together with the absence of public language and public memory surrounding what that scene meant on this side of the Atlantic, was a symptom of a wider cultural truth within the United States: the will not to know.

The boy, of course, was me. And the site at which I stood was a slaving fort in what is now Ghana, somewhere in the vicinity of the spot Broteer Farro, the African prince who would later become Venture Smith here in Connecticut, was kidnapped as a child. I was afforded the chance to visit Ghana as a high school senior, and it remains the most important journey I've ever taken. It was there that I witnessed the sheer vitality, exuberance, creativity, and openhearted kindness of the Ghanaian people, and I fell in love. It was also there that I stood at that slave fort and absorbed, really for the first time, the wounds and horrors of American history – the horrors that many white people have perpetrated, and the horrors that many black and indigenous peoples were forced to endure. I've carried those things with me ever since – that opening toward transcendent beauty that I witnessed among the Ghanaian people, coupled with a powerful awareness of the terrors perpetrated by those who looked and spoke and worshiped much like

me. But I also absorbed the silence, the failure of language, and the erosion of memory that I encountered on my return. That too has stayed with me ever since.

I tell that story to underscore something of why we've chosen to undertake this series of sermons, telling stories from the Deep North. In New England, those stories simply haven't been spoken and heard, not often enough anyway. I have no illusions that we can single handedly change that, but the sites we're visiting on our virtual Wheels of Justice journey are a way of addressing the silence that I experienced on my own return from Ghana all those years ago. These stories are a way of addressing, in whatever halting or broken language we have, the failure of public memory surrounding the history of enslavement in New England, and especially in Connecticut. They're a way of reclaiming forgotten lives and histories that matter in the present, as we face into just how very entrenched white supremacy is in this country. These stories aren't easy, but they're also necessary if we are to have an awareness of the spaces that we inhabit, of what actually occurred here, and of who was affected by those occurrences.

Today we'll be sharing three stories – the first, from New London, has to do with slaving voyages carried forth from that harbor. That segment will be narrated by Odile Brennan, who, I should add, also created the final video product that you're watching now. The second is a story I'll narrate, about a house that will be familiar to many of you here in Old Lyme. It's the house I reside in. And the third will be narrated by Kevin Booker, an educator and a good friend who has spent time thinking about Connecticut's long history of slavery, and what it means for the present.

These are stories of passages. These are stories of water. These are stories of exile and of pain, stories of ignominy and greed. But they're also stories of courageous survival. Let's head to New London, where we'll join Odile.

Conclusion:

New London, Old Lyme, and Wethersfield, all of these are located along waterways, which once served as portals, passageways, to lost worlds. When I think about the lives we encountered in our stories today, I imagine those individuals staring at the waters, meditating upon the lost world on the opposite side of the crossing. That world was known firsthand by Quash Gomer. The others would have known it only at second, third, or fourth hand, through the memories of others, handed down and passed along like scraps of nourishment.

I also imagine what it must have been like to be cut off from the symbols and ritual life that would have sustained them all. Each of those who made it as far as Connecticut carried pieces of that lost sacred world within them – a world of ancestors and spirits, of ceremonies, and dances, and drummed rhythms. Those sacred worlds were soon reblended up and down the Americas, to dazzling effect. I wonder how those sacred practices would have manifested throughout New England. No doubt it would have been different than what occurred in Charleston or New Orleans, to say nothing of various islands in the Caribbean. Still, that cultural life would have manifested itself in some way here too, even in Connecticut, even in Wethersfield, even in Old Lyme.

We'll close this segment with a song from a Haitian band called RAM, a group I've been privileged to spend time with in Port-au-Prince. The song is called Kongo Ede'm Priye (Kongo, help me to pray). The words are these: "Kongo, help me to pray. I don't have a mother. I don't have father. Kongo, help me to pray." Kongo here signifies not a country per se, but a spiritual home, the way the Psalmist speaks of Jerusalem in Psalm 137. And the inability to pray corresponds to the image in the Psalms of the singer hanging up his or her harp upon a willow tree. Song, prayer, becomes inaccessible. I imagine this as a song that might have been sung by Quash Gomer, exiled from Angola, where Kongo rites and rituals would have been practiced. But I imagine the song might also apply to others as well, from different geographies and spiritual traditions, who had to learn how to pray all over again, who had to learn what it meant to take up their harps again after they had hung them up.

Importantly, I'd like to suggest that perhaps, just perhaps, it might even apply to those of us who are white, to those of us who practice Christianity. The January 6th events reminded us that certain forms of Christian faith are funding white supremacy in the United States. But the stories we're confronting here in the Deep North force upon us the realization that we ourselves aren't as far removed from that diabolical alliance as we might wish. We too have been a part of that terrible alliance. It may be that that realization produces a kind of estrangement from our own tradition. It may be that we too begin to feel like orphans and exiles from a history, a theology, a tradition that has all too often been used to prop up white supremacy. So maybe we too need help if we are to pray. Maybe we too need help in taking up our harps yet again. Maybe we do well to join ourselves with those who experience themselves as more than a little lost. Maybe we too should begin to rethink what the sacred means, who it applies to, and what expressions embody it. Maybe we do it first by recovering these stories, and then by making ourselves familiar with the sacred traditions that have for too long been suppressed, but which may well have been practiced in the spaces all around us. Maybe we begin the necessary work of healing by appealing to Kongo as we too learn and learn again what it is to pray, what it is to take up our harps once more.

If you wish to learn more about the stories we encountered today, you can look at two important sources: *Complicity: How the North Promoted, Prolonged, and Profited from Slavery*, by Anne Farrow, Joel Lang, and Jenifer Frank, and *The Logbooks*, by Anne Farrow. In addition, Carolyn Wakeman is working on a book about slavery in Old Lyme that will tell the story of Jack Howard and the parsonage. I'm grateful to her for sharing her research for this morning's segment.

Benediction

Benediction Response:

For our benediction response, we'll head back out into the world, accompanied by another piece of sacred song. It's called The Maker, sung by Daniel Lanois. It too is a song for Quash Gomer, and for Jack and Janny and all the rest. But I think it's a song for you too. If you listen, you can hear the voice of Aaron Neville in the background, and then brought to the foreground at a crucial moment. There are few voices more beautiful, more gentle, more healing, than Aaron Neville's. I'd cross the great divide just to hear that voice. It's a song that captures what it is to

be estranged, what it is to be separated by the waters, and what it is at last to be met by the Maker, who despite it all, comes to heal, comes to restore, comes to make broken lives whole.