

Steve Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: John 3: 1-10
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Wheels of Justice: Stories of the Deep North, Part V

One of the most famous, if least understood, stories in all of the New Testament, takes place under cover of night. Nicodemus is a religious leader in Jerusalem, and he's taken an interest in the doings of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus hadn't exactly ingratiated himself with religious leaders, and so the meeting needed to happen furtively, out of sight. Something wasn't working for Nicodemus. Something was restless and unsatisfied within his heart, and so he approaches Jesus for answers. It's telling that, when Jesus senses the turmoil that Nicodemus is in, he doesn't prescribe a moralistic solution to him. He doesn't say that he needs to quit drinking, or cheating, or lying. He says something altogether different. Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You must be born for a second time, born again." What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus is that his entire way of life was in need of an overhaul. The entire structure of his life would need to change.

It's a story that we need to recall as we continue our Wheels of Justice journey through the Deep North. This virtual journey through Southern New England has been a way of defamiliarizing the territory around us. It's a way of helping us to perceive that the spaces we inhabit are haunted by the traces of indigenous and enslaved peoples, a history that has been deliberately expunged from public memory. Too often, we have functioned as amnesiacs, or to use a more poignant metaphor, as those with a kind of Alzheimer's disease, caught in an eternal present, but with little remaining memory of just how we came to be who we are. Those with firsthand knowledge of that disease know how terrible it is. And yet it is powerful figuration for our national condition regarding racial violence. Such it is, at any rate, here in the Deep North.

To engage in the recovery of those memories can be exceedingly difficult. For all the ways the stories within this series have felt enlightening at times, they bring pain and confusion with them too. How shall we respond to such stories? How shall we now live? What is required of us? What must we do, in other words, to be saved? To return to the story of Nicodemus, they can feel like nighttime descending upon us. In the depths of our hearts, we too long to approach the One who seems to hold an answer, who seems to promise another way to live. His response to us, as to Nicodemus, is unequivocal: "You must be born for a second time. You must be born not of the flesh, but of the Spirit."

What does it mean to be born of the Spirit? It means to have your heart, and your understanding enlarged beyond the confines of your family, your nation, or your tribe. It means to be joined with other human beings into a common humanity, recognizing our shared bonds one to another. It means to have our hearts broken by the preventable damage wrought upon far too many people. It means recognizing ourselves in the pain of another. It means realizing that we are held together by our status as children of God. It means recovering hidden stories, repressed memories, lost fragments of history, such that we become more than amnesiacs, more than a culture of those afflicted with spiritual and moral Alzheimer's. To be born of the Spirit, to be born from above, means that we renounce the moral power of death so prevalent in white

supremacy, allowing much of what we know to be undone. It means trusting that as we do, God is still holding us, Jesus is still guiding us, drawing us into the deep of the Spirit.

We'll resume our Deep North journey this week with a longer segment about the financialization of black bodies. We'll learn how the bodies and souls of the enslaved became instruments of capital accumulation. We'll grapple with just how extensive that capital project was, and how horrifying as well. This segment represents an extension of the economic story we've been telling all along, first about the formation of New England's colonies through trade with the West Indies, and later through industries that relied upon slavery, industries that helped to build the towns we now inhabit. Odile Brennan will narrate that piece, which begins and ends at the Aetna Health Care office building in downtown Hartford. After that, we'll travel to the Northwest corner of Connecticut, where we'll reflect upon an individual who, thankfully, recognized all the way down the systemic evil being practiced upon people of African descent, and who initiated a rebellion against that evil. Mary Tomassetti will be our guide through that portion of the story.

But let's take a trip up to Hartford now, where Odile is waiting for us.

Conclusion

Two weeks ago I spoke of the ways many of us have felt estranged from Christianity as a result of learning how deeply implicated our churches have been in the degradation of human beings. That estrangement has been compounded by the prevalence of Christian symbols in the white supremacist attack upon the Capitol building in January. It's hard to identify with any portion of the Christian tradition when it's pressed into the service of such grotesque ends.

But the story about the financialization of black bodies, which produced both horror and wealth, ought to have a similar estrangement effect upon us as Americans, and as we consider the economic system we call our own. Capitalism, like Christianity, has been an instrument of terror for many, and that terror has helped to amass the wealth that many of us take for granted, even if we ourselves wish to align with very different values.

Recall once again Jesus's words to Nicodemus: "You must be born for a second time, this time of the Spirit." I submit that those words apply not only to individuals. I believe they might also apply to America, which kept people in slavery for 244 years, which built its wealth upon the bodies of enslaved people, which created a system of apartheid that still keeps us largely separated one from another, which continues to turn people into things, worthy of economic exploitation. Perhaps America too must be born again, as we seek to address the forms of bodily, emotional, and spiritual suffering that continues to afflict far too many among us. Perhaps to be born of the Spirit is to make strides to ensure that health care is available to all, that a basic level of economic stability is available to all, that educational opportunities are available to all, that adequate housing is available to all, that nutritious food is available to all, and that protection under the law is available to all. I don't know that we need a revolution to accomplish such things. We do, however, need to be born of the Spirit, allowing our mourning, our discomfort, our pain, to be translated into a vision that seeks to ensure the bodily and spiritual well-being of all. We need to trust that such is the work Jesus.

We'll close this week's Deep North stories with a *cri de Coeur*, a cry of the heart first written by Janelle Monae, and later performed by David Byrne in his Broadway Show *American Utopia*. The song is called "Hell You Talmbout," and it gives voice to the stunned and pained outrage of police violence against people of color in our day. David Byrne is white, and he reached out to Janelle Monae, who is black, to seek her permission for the use of the song in his show. Monae was generous. It's a song that should belong to everybody she told David Byrne. It's in that spirit that we share it with you. Though it has to do with contemporary realities, I'd like you to hear the story of the Zong echoing in the background, the story of insurance policies issued upon the enslaved, the story of the capitalization of black bodies. I'd like you to hear it as John Brown's cry as well, as he observed the flagrant inhumanity and disregard of enslaved people all around him, and as he struggled to formulate his own pained response. John Brown wasn't wrong. He was merely a harbinger of what was to come.

"Say their names," the song instructs, and then it does just that, naming those who have been cast overboard by a cruel system of law enforcement. What I'd like to invite you to do is to add some other names that we've encountered along the way: Jane and Temperance, Jack Howard and Quash Gomer, William Winters, Venture Smith, and above all, this week, those who were thrown overboard from the Zong. The bitter truth is that we cannot say their names, for they are known only to God, and to the ancestors. Remember them, even as we speak those names that we do know. Even as we give expression to our own anguish and outrage. Even as we pray to be born once again, this time of the Spirit.

Benediction:

If you'd like to learn more about the stories we heard today, you can delve into Ned and Constance Sublette's book *The American Slave Coast*. You can also revisit a Sacred Conversation I conducted with Ned and Constance this past summer, which can be found on our website. For more information on John Brown, the sources are varied, but Russell Banks's novel *Cloudsplitter* is a good place to begin, as is James McBride's novel *The Good Lord Bird*.