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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: Acts 9: 1-19
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Wheels of Justice: Stories from the Deep North, Part VI

We're coming in for a landing on our Wheels of Justice series – a mixed metaphor, I know. We can actually see the lights on the landing strip just ahead. After this week, we'll have one more set of stories to tell, but then I'd actually like to open the floor up to all of you. Throughout this series I've heard from a number of you. I know that the stories we've explored have wound up stirring up a lot of related stories from personal and family histories. Others have wondered out loud what this all means, and what we ought to do with all that we've learned as we've defamiliarized the spaces around us. For those of you who are willing, I'd be interested to learn more about what this material has done to you, if anything, and where it might be leading you. We'll have that conversation on Zoom in two weeks, on Sunday March 14th, at 5:00.

I want you to know that, whatever uncomfortable or painful truths these stories have opened up in you, they've done the same for me. Several weeks ago I shared the experience of visiting Africa as an adolescent, where I was confronted with the horrors of slavery on a visceral level, and where I encountered an inexplicable silence on the subject when I returned to the United States. It was an experience that quickened me. But one of this week's stories got me thinking about another episode in my early life, one that causes me pain to remember. I offer it as a means of suggesting that if these stories of the Deep North have taken you to some uncomfortable places in your own life, you're not alone. I've been going there too. I also offer it as a warning against the temptation to make smug judgments about those who came before us. For these are stories about us as well.

I was in seventh grade, living in a college town that was, and is, predominantly white. That year a new student was enrolled at the middle school I attended. She had an old-fashioned name, and had, so it seemed, gone through a growth spurt recently, for her clothes were ill-fitting, and more than a little worn. She was tall, and thin, and walked with an awkward gait, as if she was trying her best to live into a strange new body. The glasses she wore matched her name – they were from a different era. She was shy, withdrawn, and as I recall, kind of sweet. She was also, to my knowledge, the only black child who attended that middle school.

She and her family lived in an apartment that I passed as I walked home from school every day. One winter day, after playing video games at the local arcade, I was approaching the apartment unit where she lived, and I saw some older boys throwing snowballs at the side of her house. It was an act of bullying, and a racist one at that, but for some reason I found it funny. When they had finished pelting the house with their snowballs, they turned and fled, having left small pock marks in the vinyl siding. No one emerged to scold them, or chase them down. A few days later, I passed the apartment once again, this time with a friend. I shared what I had seen, and soon we were both throwing snowballs against that vinyl siding, each of them making a noisy thwack as we left our own indentations on the building. We knew who lived there, and we thought it was funny.

To this day I wonder why I did it. My parents had taught me better. My church had taught me better. My teachers had taught me better. Even so, on that day, as an unaware eleven year old, I followed a barely concealed script of racial hierarchy and white supremacy. I became

the one who tormented another child, one who also happened to be the only black child who attended my school. I don't know if she heard the noise our snowballs made on the side of her house. If she did, I don't know what she might have thought. But as I imagine it now, each noisy thud would have been received as a soul deadening message, hurled by thoughtless and ignorant children who were, at that moment, allowing a whole culture and a whole history to express itself through them.

The hot shame I feel when I recall that episode is one of the reasons I appreciate the story of Paul in the book of Acts. For those of us who carry such memories, the story indicates that it's possible to grow, to change, to alter one's very being from the inside out. I think we desperately need to remember that story on this Wheels of Justice journey. I think we desperately need to recall that story right now as a country. It reveals to us that history is not destiny, and that who we are and what we have done are not a reflection on who we may yet become. Paul, you'll remember, had been breathing threats against the disciples of Jesus, and he was, in a fateful instant, knocked off his horse by a blinding light. A voice spoke from out of that light, asking why Paul had been persecuting not only the disciples, but Jesus himself. Paul, prior to that moment, had been Saul, a Roman citizen, who possessed all the cultural and legal privileges that citizenship implied. He was, if you will, the ancient equivalent of what it now means to be white. But in that moment of revelation, when the voice of one of those who suffered reached him, everything changed for Paul – his name, his identity, his choice of friends, his moral commitments, everything. Jesus confronted him as the very voice of the Disinherited, the face of those he threatened, and in that instance, everything shifted. Jesus comes even to one such as Paul, even to one such as you, even to one such as me.

I suspect many white folks have stories like mine, tucked away somewhere. OK...if it be so, let us own it. Analogously, I know that many families, many church communities, many towns, many states, many regions, are bearers of stories akin to my own. Let us own those too. They're useful reminders that we're not all sweetness and light, that we must exercise vigilance, lest that part of our souls forces its way into the open. Let them make us humble. Let them make us merciful toward those who may be in a different place on these matters – we should be able to see ourselves in them, at least in part. But let us own this as well: the promise of conversion, of change, and of moral growth, as delivered in the story of Paul. Let us affirm, for ourselves, for our community, and for our very country, that Jesus isn't through with us, and that grace can and does work in our midst. Quite often, it comes as an interruption that knocks us off our horse.

Those are themes that we'll encounter in both of the Deep North stories we'll share today. They're stories of casual cruelty, and of the intimidation of children by other children. They're stories of profound courage, of prophetic witness, and of necessary interruptions. But they're also stories about how change comes to occur, of how cultures can gradually shift, of how moral growth can and sometimes does take place.

For the first of our segments, we'll travel to the town of Canterbury, which is here in Eastern Connecticut. There, Marilyn Nelson will narrate the story of Prudence Crandall, and the school that she opened for African American girls in the 1820's. After that, we'll come right back here, to our Meetinghouse, where David Good will share a piece of our own congregation's history from that era, history embedded right here in the Meetinghouse.

Conclusion

I'd like to offer a short coda to David's stories about the segregated pews within our Meetinghouse, and the excommunication of Nancy. After the fire that burned the previous Meetinghouse down in 1907, this structure was built in its place, a near identical replica. It was dedicated in 1910. Upon the occasion of the dedication, Woodrow Wilson, then the President of Princeton University, soon to be President of the United States, ascended to the pulpit, and offered an address to this community. Whatever his intellectual and political gifts, Wilson was also a strident racist and segregationist. But he was, evidently, quite at home here in the Lymes – this is where he summered.

When other Ivy League institutions were actively seeking to enroll African American students, Wilson worked to keep them out of Princeton. While in the White House, he screened the film *The Birth of a Nation*, which celebrates the formation of the Ku Klux Klan. The film approvingly cites Wilson himself in one of its title cards, and it is widely credited as reviving the Klan, which until then had been all but defunct. More troubling still, he presided over a strict segregation of the Federal government, where Federal buildings were equipped with barriers separating work stations, and where separate bathrooms and dining areas were imposed. Wilson was a preacher's kid, and he had grown up in Virginia listening to his father extoll the virtues of the South, and of slavery. And so it comes as one more difficult truth that we must contend with here in the Deep North, that this very Meetinghouse was blessed and dedicated by an ardent segregationist.

Poor Woodrow Wilson. If only he could have recognized the irony that confronted him when he spoke on that day in 1910. The congregation that day sat in pews adorned by Africa – African mahogany. The communion table, the last vestige that Protestant Churches retain of an altar – that too was constructed of African wood. It is, if I may say so, a secret African altar, placed immediately beneath the location from which Wilson spoke. But the greatest irony of all would have been the ascent Wilson made in order to access the pulpit. Those steps – these steps here – were also born from Africa. They too are made from African wood. In order to speak to the community gathered in 1910, Wilson ascended upon Africa. He was, along with everyone gathered on that day, adorned by, in communion with, and elevated by...Africa. That continues to be true to this very day.

Is that not the secret history of the Deep North? Is that not the secret history of Old Lyme? And is that not the secret history of the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme? That secret has been out with regard to the United States as a whole, but it's one that needs to be spoken aloud in this setting. Whether we recognize it or not, this community has always been shaped by proximity to Africa, even if that knowledge has remained deeply buried. Our task is to continue to speak that secret openly, and to not let it be forgotten. Our task is to tell the truth of who we have been, trusting that in speaking that truth, such a thing as reconciliation can and will emerge.

But look: it's not 1910, and I'm no longer eleven years old. Growth occurs. In our context, an awful lot has happened in the last 111 years. We're not who we were, thanks to the leadership of those like Dick Hoag, thanks to the leadership of those like David Good, thanks to the leadership of countless members of this community who have pushed and prodded to bring this community closer to the Spirit of the authentic Jesus. We're not who we were, and for that, we can give thanks. Even so, we can still strive to become more.

We'll close this week with a song from the Neville Brothers. It's a song entitled "My Blood," and it comes from one of my favorite albums of all time, *Yellow Moon*. Each verse names a part of the world that we've been privileged to be in relation with over the last decades –

Africa, Haiti, the Reservation in South Dakota. It prays for God's blessings to fall upon those lands and those peoples. And it makes a profound affirmation: "that's my blood down there," the Nevilles sing. As the song plays, you'll see images from all of our partnerships displayed on your screens. I hope it leads you to affirm in your own heart: That's my blood too. That's my blood down there. For we are all a part of the same human family, in need of care, in need of mercy, in need of healing, in need of love.

Benediction

If you'd like to learn more about today's stories, the places to look are in Marilyn Nelson's book *Miss Crandall's School for Young Ladies and Little Misses of Color*, which she co-authored with Elizabeth Alexander. Information about our history as a congregation can be found in Carolyn Wakeman's book *Forgotten Voices*, and in David Good's own collection of sermons, *The Fifth Meetinghouse*, available in our church office.