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 Texts: 2 Samuel 6: 1-5, 14-19; Matthew 13: 1-9  
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### Wheels of Justice: Stories from the Deep North, Part VII

Our Wheels journey is rolling into its final stops today. We'll be visiting two places this week, moving our timeline a little closer to the present. Our first stop will be in Old Saybrook, where Maryam Elahi will share with us the history of the James Pharmacy, and its connection to the Harlem Renaissance. Following that visit, we'll come back across the river, and I'll meet you on the grounds of the Flo Gris, the place that we started this whole journey. And I'll share with you why and how these stories aren't simply about the past, but have to do with our present. After that, we'll come back here, and I'll lay out something of what this journey might come to mean for us as a faith community.

As we make these final stops, I want you to have the parable of the sower in mind, where Jesus tells a story about a farmer scattering seeds along the ground. Some of that seed fell on rocky soil, among thorns, and in barren soil, yielding little. But some of it fell on fertile ground, producing an abundance of growth. Seeds are scattered within each of us, and it's clear that for many people, the thorns, rocks, or barren places within their souls crowd out the potential for goodness. We've seen that over and over again on our journey through the Deep North. Some thorny, rocky, barren place within the human heart led some to create a hell on earth for indigenous peoples and for those descended from Africa. But some seed falls on good soil, and it grows and flowers and flourishes in surprising ways. That was true of Venture Smith and his family. It was true, so far as we can tell, of Quash Gomer, and William Winters. It was true of Prudence Crandall, and whatever we might think of John Brown, I would argue it was true of him as well. The seed sown in hearts such as theirs blossomed, and it yielded good fruit.

Perhaps we too are nurturing seeds within our hearts. Perhaps these stories from the Deep North are such seeds, given to us to tend and grow. As we make these visits in the coming moments, I simply invite you to consider the seeds that might be worth nurturing and tending in your heart and in our world today. I invite you to ask: what is it that needs tending? What is it that needs growth and care here, and now, in this place called the Deep North?

### Conclusion to Wheels of Justice: Stories from the Deep North

There are many lessons to be drawn from the journey through the Deep North that we have undertaken together, a journey that I imagine will continue from time to time as we move forward. One consequence of this journey is the knowledge that the early history of New England is incomprehensible if that history is told from the perspective of the Pilgrims, the Puritans, and other European emigres. Such histories fail to absorb the enormity of what occurred among the native population that already resided here, and the waves of pain and trauma that was unleashed as a result of those Puritan arrivals. As Michael Kickingbear reminded us, that pain still resonates, even now, some 400 years later. But those histories also fail to absorb another crucial feature of early New England: not only was there a powerful native presence here; there was an African presence as well. The Africans who arrived here would

likely have come from three major regions of the continent: Senegambia, what is now Sierra Leone, Gambia, and other places on the upper Western coast of the continent – that’s where the ships arriving in New London harbor that we encountered several weeks ago were arriving from; traveling further south along the coast, others would have come from Guinea, or what is now Ghana, the Ivory Coast, and Togo. That’s where Venture Smith was captured. Others may have come from what is now Nigeria and Benin. Finally, many came from the Kongo, or Angola region of the continent, what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the nation of Angola. That’s where Quash Gomer was kidnapped, and brought to live and work in Wethersfield. That means that all along, there has been a significant African presence in Connecticut, but also throughout New England. It means that an African culture would have taken shape right here, one that was likely all but invisible to the Puritans and their descendants, those who built the towns we reside in. Enslaved peoples here were separated in ways they weren’t throughout the South, and so we don’t have a strong tradition of black music or dance or visual art from New England analogous to what emerged in other parts of the country. But we can be sure that pieces of Africa were retained in hushed and fragmentary ways throughout the Deep North.

If that’s true of New England as a whole, it’s especially true of Old Lyme. For me, the most significant revelation of this journey has been the realization that that African presence would have existed right here, in our town. We have records of at least 160 enslaved people in Lyme and Old Lyme alone. What sort of African retentions would they have had? What songs might have been passed down, from parents to children, or shared across families? What sacred practices might have survived across the Middle Passage, across the generations, to be found here in Old Lyme, and all across the Deep North? Those are questions that scholars and researchers are only now beginning to explore, but it is certain that those African retentions and survivals existed right here, all around us in Old Lyme. To the Puritans and their descendants, those retentions would likely have presented themselves as witchcraft, as superstition, or as devil worship, and they would have worked to banish – to whitewash – those practices from the lives of the enslaved but also from the spaces around us. Even so, we can be sure those African traces were here, every bit as much as the descendants of those who were first kidnapped from Africa were here.

Unfortunately, a lot of people, especially white Protestants, still have that response when they encounter indigenous or African religious practices. Those religions are often labeled “cults,” even in venerable publications such as the New York Times, and their adherents are said to traffic in the “occult.” Such a response lacks intellectual sophistication. And it lacks comprehension of the religious dynamics that have been in our midst for centuries. It is a tragic reminder of the racist and colonial history that continues to beset us. It’s reinforced everywhere in popular culture, where rituals born of Africa become the stuff of horror films. It’s tacitly reinforced in our seminaries and divinity schools, many of which don’t see fit to expose students to African practices. It’s reinforced by evangelical missionaries from the United States, who send well-meaning but ignorant people to places throughout Africa and the African diaspora to rid residents of those African spiritual retentions. And it’s reinforced by predominantly white Mainline denominations like the UCC and the Presbyterians, the Episcopalians and the Methodists, who have spent little time engaging with, let alone trying to understand and fall in love with any of those African practices. I believe it’s time to change all that.

A year ago, just before the pandemic brought the world to a halt, I found myself in Port-au-Prince sitting on the porch of the splendid Hotel Oloffson, a place with a long association with the practice of Vodou, one of Haiti's most significant contributions to world culture. A few hours later, I would take part in a long, 24-hour Vodou ritual, but in that moment at the Oloffson, I was in conversation with a man named Richard Morse, the proprietor of the hotel, and the leader of the band RAM, who we heard from several weeks ago. Richard was raised in New Haven – his father was a professor at Yale – and he grew up going to a Congregationalist church. But his mother is Haitian, and after college Richard moved to Haiti and began engaging his mother's culture more fully. He became an initiate in Vodou, and he calls what he now does Puritan Vodou. It's a nod to that part of himself that was formed in Congregationalist churches, as well as that aspect of him that was formed by engaging his mother's religion, which was born of Africa. It's a synthesis I admire, one that progressive religious folk might do well to emulate.

"You've got a 500-year-old wall within you," Morse told me. "Protestantism, especially the Congregationalist variety, is minimalist religion. It's reluctant about images, about visual symbols, and about rituals. It's a religious expression devoted to words, and so it operates in the head. African religions are different. Vodou in particular is maximalist. There's an amplitude of rituals, symbols, viscosity, everything. But what you're working with in Mainline Protestantism is 500 years of trying to keep that maximalism out."

"Is there a way to tunnel under that wall," I asked? "Or is there a way to scale the wall and go over it?"

Morse's response was telling. "I don't think so," he said. "It's more like that wall in the Harry Potter movies. You have to go through it in order to get to the other side."

It turns out that Morse was describing a conflict that exists within the Bible as well. There is an element of expressive, maximalist religion within the pages of the Bible, but it always sits very uneasily with the minimalist, word centered understanding of religion. That conflict is best seen in the story of King David that we heard earlier, where David dances with abandon, in a manner that likely bears more in common with African traditions than it would with, say, the liturgical dancing I've witnessed from time to time in church settings. That expressive display is the occasion for scandal for at least one observer, who tells the king that he has disgraced himself by his actions. King David himself is unmoved by the criticism. But the story as a whole encapsulates the tension that often exists between minimalist and maximalist expressions of religion throughout our tradition. That tension travels into the New Testament as well, where Spirit filled eruptions take place, and then are either suppressed or domesticated elsewhere. It's likely, for instance, that early expressions of the Eucharist – Communion – were Spirit filled affairs, where participants would evince what to our eyes would look like spirit possession. Jesus seemed entirely comfortable in that ecstatic expressive world, and the synoptic Gospels in particular suggest that Jesus himself operated as a kind of shamanic figure, which is to say, in a way that bears more than a casual resemblance to African religions. There is, in other words, strong and compelling biblical ground to help us both to understand this historic tension, but also to move through it, freeing us to embrace the African traditions that our forebears feared, and thereafter worked to eradicate.

Following that conversation at the Oloffson, I took part in that Vodou ritual, and it was transformative for me, in ways I don't have time to elaborate upon just now. But if I were to design a seminary or divinity school curriculum that was responsive to the racial upheavals we've experienced this past year, and long before that too, in addition to thinking about the history of race in America and in addition to thinking about social justice, I would require students identifying as Christian, Jewish, or Muslim to study an African or indigenous religious practice, and to actually participate in that tradition. I would require aspiring ministers to adopt a kind of "shadow" religious practice, in addition to their dominant tradition, a requirement not unlike learning a second (or third) language. So too, I would encourage congregations, with their 500-year-old walls, to begin exploring the music, rituals, and aesthetics of those African practices. I would find ways to invite individuals within congregations, such as ours, to have some exposure to those traditions. I would start to explore what that wall actually is, and to start dismantling it brick by brick, even while learning what it means to walk through walls. In sum, I would seek to resurrect what was already present here in the Deep North, what was already among us, even though it was suppressed and shunned. In addition to the ethical commitments entailed by our journey through the Deep North, I would insist upon a religious or spiritual commitment as well, which is to say, inviting African traditions back into our midst, for we have shunned them for far too long. In essence, I would have us explore our own version of Puritan Vodou, right here in the Deep North.

That's the seed that I wish to sow on this journey through the Deep North. That's why I'm so pleased that Issa Coulibaly is here with us today. These are sounds that worshiping communities need to become better acquainted with if we're going to learn to walk through walls. It won't be the last time we hear such sounds in our Meetinghouse. But it's also a seed that I hope we all continue to nurture and grow as we move past the legacy of the Deep North. I'm imagining all kinds of ways to do that – field trips into New York from time to time to hear and witness some of the greatest music to emerge from the African traditions, and time with the artists themselves to connect what they do with a spiritual vision; I imagine visits to the Oloffson in Haiti, sacred ground if ever there was such, where we would hear RAM and speak to Richard Morse about his own understanding of Puritan Vodou. I imagine visiting artists and thinkers coming to Old Lyme to share their wisdom and knowledge, and I imagine excursions to other places as well, like New Orleans, which can help us detect the sacred strains, the spiritual vibrations that flow even here, even in the Deep North, even in Old Lyme. We must seek to overcome the legacy of suffering and sorrow that continues to haunt us, but we must also learn to dance and to move if we are to walk through walls.

Issa will close us out today, but before he does, hear this song from Mavis Staples, accompanied by images from the sites we've visited over the past seven weeks. The song is called "Sow Good Seeds." It's a fitting conclusion to all we've come through together. Sow good seeds everybody.