

Sermon: *Know Their Names: Witnessing on Lyme Street*  
*Luke 24:13-35*  
*Habakkuk 2:11a*  
4/11/21

I stood on the lawn with my nephew, Fitz, and witnessed with joy his 9th birthday party drive-by a few weeks ago. He was dressed in his favorite colors and smiled sheepishly with every stopping car as friends delivered homemade signs and festive looking wrapped packages. My eyes filled with tears more than a few times. Later that evening after some peppermint stick ice cream, we watched Fitz choreograph a new dance to Lady Gaga's, *Born This Way*, his arms wide and graceful. Dancing and math are his passions at the moment. I said a silent prayer that he would always be surrounded by people who loved him and that he would always know his worth. *Dear God, let him know his name will always be BELOVED.*

Fitz' dad is an immigrant from India and his mother, my sister, is Irish- American. As a child of color, Fitz was aware at a young age that his skin was a different shade than mine. I don't know if he's been subject to any derogatory comments. But as he grows older, I worry.

I remember all this as I stand in the wet greening grass on our church lawn a few days ago-just past the granite bench. It is here that four of 14 Witness Stones will be placed, marking sites of enslavement and honoring the names of those enslaved here. Among them, will be a stone for a child Fitz' age by the name of Cato, who died here in 1734, at the age of 10. Cato was owned by the Rev. Jonathan Parsons (ordained to our Church in 1731; The first two ministers of our church here and in Lyme were known to be slave owners.) Cato served Parson's household living just next door from our church. Right over there. We don't know who his parents were...we don't know how he lived or died...but we can remember him.

Cato is among the names of the fourteen people we will honor with Witness Stones along Lyme Street this spring. You'll be able to follow a map of the witness stones placed at properties along Lyme Street (such as the McCurdy House across the street and the Parsonage) where people were enslaved. The route will extend from our church lawn to just past the Bee and Thistle, now home to the Estuary Council and almost to Sill Lane.

For those of you who aren't familiar with it, the Witness Stones originated with a retired history teacher, Dennis Culliton from Guilford who had followed the communal remembrance projects from Germany called *Stolpersteine* or "Stumbling Stones". They were started by the artist, Gunter Demnig, who said of his memory stones, quoting the Talmud, "a person is only forgotten when his or her name is forgotten".

We've worked with Dennis to adapt a Witness Stones partnership here in Old Lyme. We cannot change the past, but we can, through this remembrance journey, give a voice to the voiceless by recovering their names and their stories.

One of the gifts of this pandemic year for me has been joining the Witness Stones effort which has grown into a collaboration among several town organizations-our church, the Lyme Old

Lyme Schools, the Phoebe Griffin-Noyes Library and the Florence Griswold Museum. We're all in this re-tracing the footsteps of history together.

Thanks to the extraordinary research and leadership of our church historian and author, Carolyn Wakeman, and with help from other church and community members, we can now remember those named with Witness stones not as property but as full human beings. Thus far, what we know from property records, deeds of sale and town records, is that from 1670-1820 there were more than 200 hundred African-Americans and Native Americans enslaved here in historic Lyme. We're honoring only fourteen of them, some of whom were children and some were adults, representing only a handful of those forgotten by history.

We've also partnered with four African American women poets from CT. Our church member, Marilyn Nelson, has put a team together with Kate Rushin, Rhonda Ward and Antoinette Brim Bell. These artists are writing story poems and helping us to give voice and power to those we're memorializing. These will be shared at a dedication ceremony in June. We are grateful for their gifts and guidance and we have much to learn from them on this journey.

Until recently, their erasure from our collective knowledge and education system has in itself contributed--and perpetuated-- to the systemic sin of slavery and white supremacy.

As the Wheels of Justice journey into the Deep North has taught us, it is our time now to reckon with the weight of history and reshape the cultural and historical landscape in an effort to more truthfully teach our children and grandchildren well. For some of us this local historical record of racial injustice may be new, and for others, it is a painful family legacy of generations.

Who are we now that we know this history of enslavement is our own shared history? Are not our hearts burning with the terrible knowledge and injustice of it?

Writes the theologian, Howard Thurman, whose book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949) we are studying for our church book study this month, "Again and again, I am aware that the Light not only illumines but it also *burns*."<sup>1</sup>

Our Post-Easter scripture story for the day has us walking with burning hearts along the Emmaus Road. Unique to Luke, it is a travelogue of sorts, a post-Easter appearance with Jesus, who isn't recognized as he walks alongside two of the disciples (amazed by the apparent ignorance of the traveler beside them.)

In Luke's telling, two of Jesus' disciples find their hearts burning within them as they spend time with Jesus on the road. We hear again the retelling of the news of Jesus' crucifixion, death and the rolled-away stone.

Ultimately, it is an exchange of bread and stories and hospitality that leads to a change of heart and sight. Luke highlights the moment when "Jesus had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread" (24.35)

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*

The travelers returned to Jerusalem with hearts on fire as they go and tell what they've experienced to the others. In their later reflections/conversation, the dissident Jesus, is not just a teacher- prophet of the past but alive in every one of their steps. They are seeing in a different way now-and it's no accident that they do it together. Their sharpened vision and awakened hearts takes place not on a solo journey but through a communal one. No matter what they might encounter farther along up the road.

We can imagine how they felt their hearts burning up with the truth of what it meant to love neighbor in the face of injustice and terror. The sojourners are on a journey as we are- as we all are trying to find a way to help to create a new, changed world.

Do not our hearts burn as we face these truths and seek equity and justice in our endeavors together as a people of faith...? Ultimately, the story of Easter holds that message. That whatever it is you believe or don't believe, we're invited to wake up to a gospel that has us walk alongside and witness to the disinherited, the marginalized and those left erased by the side of the road.

Saying one another's names as we go.

**Learning our history, or shall I say, re-learning our history** is a work of excavation and reparation, truth-telling and soul searching. I would go even on to say that it is a work of faith-- and an act of resurrection.

Wrote the scholar Drew Gilpin Faust, "Only by coming to terms with history can we free ourselves to create a more just world."<sup>2</sup>

Being an intentional witness to this history requires humility, truth telling, compassion and an openness to change. It's knowing that some things are true even if we don't want to be reminded of them. The journey of the witness stones ask us to recognize this history as our own— to integrate them into how we understand the world and how we struggle, as people of faith, as neighbors to make a difference.

All week, the world news has followed the unfolding trial of Derek Chauvin, the Minnesotan police officer accused of manslaughter in the murder of George Floyd. Listening to the witnesses at the Chauvin trial as they offer testimony about the tragic scene was heart wrenching. They (the children, EMT's and others who spoke ) showed immense bravery speaking up for what they'd seen and yet, could not stop.

I remember how many of us gathered on our church lawn last spring joining in the protest marches honoring Mr. Floyd's memory, calling for justice and chanting, "Know Their Names". In the paper yesterday was a photograph of flowers displayed outside the Minnesota courthouse with a handmade sign that said RIP, "Rest in Power."

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<sup>2</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, President Emeritus of Harvard (speech at The Universities and Slavery: Bound by History Conference at Harvard University on March 3, 2017.)

Rest in power. That's part of the dedication for the souls we'll honor. However imperfect our efforts, our witnessing and reparative work is meaningful only as it also leads us to the Lyme Street of today. To our collective work in racial equity and sustained and crucial efforts toward making change like building affordable housing in Old Lyme, expanding the school curriculum to include learning the hard history of the Deep North here in Lyme-Old Lyme (The OL Middle School has begun teaching the curriculum with the 7th grade Social Studies, English and Art classes.)

And thirdly, getting our town to sign onto the Letter stating that racism as a public health issue.

Let us know their names, let us witness injustice where we see it, let us raise our voices in support of those of today and those of the past, who have much to teach us about restorative truth-telling and justice. These stones cry out for our hearts to keep burning....so that we might bravely become as Isaiah prophesied, "repairers of the breach, restorers of the streets to live in." (Isaiah 58:12)

Let us know their names:

Cato

Lewis Lewia

Humphrey

Caesar

Jack Howard

Jenny Freeman

Luce

Crusa

Nancy Freeman

Jane

Temperance Still

Samuel Freeman

Pompey Freeman

Arabella

AMEN.

“Our nation’s history of racial injustice casts a shadow across the American landscape,” EJI Director Bryan Stevenson explains. “This shadow cannot be lifted until we shine the light of truth on the destructive violence that shaped our nation, traumatized people of color, and compromised our commitment to the rule of law and to equal justice.” —Bryan Stevenson