Holy Remembrance

Reflections on a Civil Rights Pilgrimage

There are many ways to retrace the footsteps of those who struggled for justice and equality during the Civil Rights Movement. Actually being there, however, gives it new meaning. Walking in the footsteps of those who marched for equal dignity becomes otherworldly as the present blurs together with the past. Even conversations in the parks or nearby historic monuments with men and women who were in their childhood years during the height of the Civil Rights Movement added to the surreal nature of how far we have come as a nation and how much farther we must go. Firsthand accounts like these are invaluable sources to what has been well documented while simultaneously forgotten by many in this country. Entering the spaces where hope rose faster than hatred could run rampant in the South created a new awareness of the evils of racism and the call to resist the temptation of our country's original sin.

Our Civil Rights Pilgrimage was a week-long journey that began in New Orleans to understand the period of enslavement in this country. This tragic legacy continued in various forms through the Jim Crow era and continues in the mass incarceration of African Americans today. The social, economic, and political consequences of enslavement and oppression were present as relics of the past as well as in present day conditions. Repeatedly, in places like Mobile, Selma, Montgomery, and Birmingham, the past and the present seemed eerily connected, as racism did not simply disappear at the end of the Civil War nor through the passage of Civil Rights legislation. No, walking in these footsteps revealed not only how devastating racism continues to be to victims of oppression today but also how the chains of hatred bind the perpetrators in their warped reality. The following reflections are pilgrims' testimonies of our country's ongoing struggle for racial reconciliation. It is our desire that these reflections will spur other groups to make a similar pilgrimage and to keep alive the struggle of so many prophetic men and women.

Whitney Plantation in Edgard, LA

Whitney Plantation is located just outside the city of New Orleans. This two-thousand-acre slave plantation property stands as a living witness and testimony to the sinful reality of slaveholding throughout this country. This is not the only former plantation that exists as a museum; there are a half a dozen or more scattered throughout the rural parts of the various surrounding parishes. The Whitney Plantation stands out uniquely in presentation and perspective since it does not attempt to glamorize the role of the slave owner or the stately plantation mansion. It indeed does not hold back any punches when conveying the harsh living conditions and labor pains endured by the slaves at the hands of ruthless and violent slave owners. More poignantly, the tour guides and staff of the now-museum candidly share the cruel, unjust, and sinful structures that perpetuated this reality on the plantation.

The most striking thing about this tour was the surprising reality of being handed the

entrance ticket, which was somewhat unconventional in form. These tickets were a lanyard and we were instructed to wear it around our neck for the duration of our stay at the plantation. Pictured on each lanyard was an image of an "enslaved person" who lived through the atrocities of this plantation. Enslaved person? I was unfamiliar with this type of terminology. Weren't they all slaves? A slave with a name? This reality, my ignorance, and the awareness of my immediate prejudices hit me with piercing intensity. We were not visiting some historical site that was a part of the ancient past. We were visiting the home of people, persons just like me, who had names, faces, families, hopes, and, unfortunately, shattered dreams. The enslaved persons were inviting us into their reality. We were no longer standing on any old piece of land or some slave owner's property. This was indeed holy ground.

Francis Doby was the enslaved person who would be my companion. Francis was one hundred years old when he was interviewed by the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s." The picture on the lanyard depicts him as a young child, small in stature, wide-eyed, with very curly hair. He has an intriguing stance and facial expression filled with childlike curiosity. He is dressed in a small and dusty raggedy jumper. He came to this plantation as a child with his family. On the back of the lanyard reads of a quote from Francis, "… Out in de camp, out yonda in de camp near da cane fields, my ole, ole granma, too old to work and too old to make de babies, she stay mind us young childens so dat de ma kin all work in de fields and dey feed dam an all so when de ma come back all dey got to do is to push 'em in de bed, all of dem in de same bed." Don't these words convey the great affection he had for his grandmother? She seemed to be his source of protection, care, and nourishment in the midst of hostility and violence of this plantation.

I felt an immediate kinship with Francis. I was protected, cared for, and nourished by a loving grandmother during my early childhood too. Francis, who was so innocently displayed on the lanyard, was no longer an image on an entrance pass or just any slave from our violent distant past. Francis was a person, created and loved by God, and my friend.

Saving up riches without regard for the other
We see it in the Gospel
We saw it on plantations
Exploitation of persons
Humans as disposable
Beings owned by other beings
Dressed up, fattened up, excercised, and auctioned off
The notary signed off on the purchase
Noting the person in front of you as "moveable property"
Despite being created in God's image

You recoup the eight hundred dollars you pay for a person in four growing seasons
Then their life is not worth protecting
It's easier to buy someone else
Or to rent them for the season
Or to have your female slaves constantly pregnant

Property bearing property
Capital producing capital
At no cost to you
How economical

407,000 pounds of sugar in one year
At the cost of how many lives?

Raising a child as your own
A daughter to your childless wife
At least until she's older
And attractive
And can carry your child
Who you have baptized
With your own name on his birth certificate
But who is still considered property
Because his mother was your slave
Your slave who you raped
Little did you know
Your son would become a patriarch
Pépère
Two of his descendants become mayors of New Orleans
Is this the beginning of justice?
Is this the coming of the Kingdom?
"The last shall be first and the first shall be last"

—Text written by one of the participants

Reflect:

1. What makes you feel connected to people?
2. What does it mean to walk in someone's shoes? Can we?
3. Everyone is God's child—how to you experience it?

Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, AL

When your children shall ask you in time to come saying,
"What mean these 12 stones?"
Then you shall tell them how you made it over (Joshua 4:21-22)

This quote is chiseled into a rock sculpture in a humble park at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, AL. It is mere yards from where, on "Bloody Sunday" of March 7, 1965, innocent women and men were brutally beaten by local authorities for wanting to march across the

bridge and on toward the State Capitol in Montgomery. People like Marie Foster, a local organizer, were marching to demand that it not be illegal to register Black folk to vote in Selma and beyond. She was beaten that day, only to return two weeks later with swollen body to march to Montgomery. In Selma, at the National Voting Rights Museum, they call the women like Marie Foster and others who marched far from the microphones and limelight the "Foot Soldiers" of the Civil Rights Movement. These Foot Soldiers embody God's work in the world, Black liberation theology in action.

From the very beginning of the pilgrim road, we have learned how important it is to say the names of all those who might be forgotten to history but who paved the way for the lives we live today. During the Civil Rights Movement, thousands of people like Marie Foster were involved in bringing truth and justice into the consciousness of every American citizen. We are beneficiaries of their courage and must tell the stories of how they made it over. We must also tell the stories of the others who never saw the fruits of their labor because they were killed and murdered on the long road to freedom. Marie Foster's life is not defined by the fact that she was bruised by a state trooper's baton in 1965. Rather, her life tells the story of a woman who persevered and lived into her 86th year, past the outward brutality of Jim Crow segregation. Marie Foster's life urges us to follow, observe, and learn how she got over.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees

—Billie Holiday

In the context of African-American life, from the Middle Passage to our contemporary times, black sacred song has continued its long-distance endurance, across time and space, to bear witness to truth and catastrophic reality apparent in its respective age. In the face of violence and evil, my forebears sung as a testament of faith, a deliverance of a hope found upward. The creative fidelity and integrity of song must always be in response to what is or has manifested culturally, politically, economically, or socially. For example, the Spirituals were originally work songs developed out of the stifled, agonizing conditions of the cotton and sugar cane fields of American plantations. But these were not only songs to pass time or for simple entertainment, they were, purposely, a communication to God of the suffering and plight of enslaved Africans. These spirituals were in direct response to their current situation, the vicious institution of slavery that kept their mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers in chains perpetually. The evocative power of these songs kept their souls intact and in line with a higher power that gave them the insurmountable strength to continue to bear witness.

How could a people who have been kidnapped, enslaved, lynched, and Jim Crow'd across 400 years remain sane yet still find an upward narrative of hope and redemption in the Kingdom of God, expressive in music, in lyric—leaning on the Everlasting Song? This particular song exposed the horrors of lynching. When Billie sang that most horrifying line, "Blood on the leaves and blood

at the root," she was engaged with truth-telling at the highest level in unmasking the catastrophic event of lynching as it was met upon over 4,500 precious black souls between 1877-1950. Lynching became a vicious tool of racial control, largely in the American South, primarily a technique of enforcing racial exploitation. Yet, despite the evils wrought through lynching, Billie still sang as testament to her forebears. She remained true to the best of her tradition to respond not with hatred or revenge but with love and justice. When faced, with the evils of the past and confronted with those of the present, it is easy to grow weary, depressed, and frustrated.

Reflect:

1. Do you know the name of recent victims of oppression? Can you gather some of them?
2. Why is it important to remember these victims and their tragic death? How else can one remember and honor the past?
3. How does one resist evil without getting "weary, depressed, and frustrated?"

Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, AL

History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived,
but if faced with courage, need not be lived again."

—Maya Angelou

As we drove the highway to Montgomery it was hard not to imagine the many days it took the marchers to arrive at the Capitol building. I saw them camping on the side of the two-lane highway and heard them singing as they walked. They were marching to bring truth to the powerful and to declare that *We Shall Overcome*. As Maya Angelou describes, remembering brutality is part and parcel of facing down history's painful memories. Overcoming brutality and dehumanization takes courage and fidelity. The Equal Justice Initiative has been doing the hard work of facing history's "wrenching pain" through its Legacy Museum and the newly opened National Monument for Peace and Justice. The colloquial name for the latter is The Lynching Memorial.

The Equal Justice Initiative has chosen to build its headquarters and The Legacy Museum on the very foundation of the second largest auction block for the sale of enslaved human beings in the nation. Montgomery is second only to New Orleans, Louisiana. From this specific location, they tell the story of lynching, racism, and the sinful legacy they have left in US culture. The sin of racism has permeated every aspect of life in the United States because it was woven so early into the fabric of the culture.

Truth telling is not easy but it is necessary. The Lynching Memorial remembers legacy in a more somber way because lynching's legacy is mass incarceration, police brutality, and white supremacy. There the sin of lynching is brought into the light and shown for what it is. Over 4,000 names of women and men, brutally murdered for being Black in a White Supremacist world, are displayed on steel coffin-like sculptures hanging from the ceiling of the monument. We walked among and beneath the sculptures as name after name washed over us. In one corridor of the

memorial several bios are affixed to the wall, telling stories like this one: "Henry Bedford, a 74-year old formerly-enslaved man, was lynched in Pelahatchie, Mississippi, in 1934 for 'talking disrespectfully' to young white men." Henry Bedford is a living stone, telling the story of our sinful past so that it will not be forgotten or repeated.

This carries through to another of our stops in Montgomery: the Legacy Museum, which follows the trail of slavery and lynching forward to the present day and police killings of blacks and disproportionate incarceration of black men. "African Americans make up about 13 percent of the nation's population." Let that sink in—a little over 10% of the population. What about their incarceration? "[They] constitute 28 percent of all arrests, 40 percent of those incarcerated in jails and prisons, and 42 percent of the population on death row. African Americans are arrested at rates 2.5 times higher than whites." Blacks have been defined as lacking something, which sets them apart from humanity.

Litany of Lynching Victims – 10/24/18

Lord have mercy	**Lord have mercy**
Christ have mercy	**Christ have mercy**
Lord have mercy	**Lord Have Mercy**
Roger and Dorothy Malcom	**Pray for us**
Henry Lowry	**Pray for us**
Emmett Louis Till	**Pray for us**
Jesse Thorton	**Pray for us**
Mrs. Wise	**Pray for us**
Private Felix Hall	**Pray for us**
William Miller	**Pray for us**
Bush Withers	**Pray for us**
All you holy men and women pray for us	
Samuel Smith	**Pray for us**
Brandon McClelland	**Pray for us**
Frazier and Julia Baker	**Pray for us**
Elijah Lovejoy	**Pray for us**
George and Mae Murray Dorsey	**Pray for us**
James Reeb	**Pray for us**
Grant George	**Pray for us**
Bunk Richardson	**Pray for us**
All you holy men and women pray for us	
Elmore Bolling	**Pray for us**
Andrew Goodman	**Pray for us**
James Chaney	**Pray for us**
Michael Schwerner	**Pray for us**

Reverend Isaac Simmons	**Pray for us**
Otis Parham	**Pray for us**
Raymond Gunn	**Pray for us**
JC Evans	**Pray for us**

All you holy men and women pray for us

Malcolm Wright	**Pray for us**
James Byrd Junior	**Pray for us**
Elbert Williams	**Pray for us**
Bruce Tisdale	**Pray for us**
Gibson Johnson	**Pray for us**
Eli Cooper	**Pray for us**
Warren Eaton	**Pray for us**
Robert Jernigan	**Pray for us**

All you holy men and women pray for us

Lord be merciful	**Save your people**
From all evil	**Save your people**
From every sin	**Save your people**
From everlasting death	**Save your people**
By your incarnation	**Save your people**
By your death and resurrection	**Save your people**
By your gift of the Spirit	**Save your people**
Have mercy on us sinners	**Save your people**

Christ, hear us; Lord, Jesus, hear our prayer

—Adapted from John Becker's *Litany of Saints*

Reflect:

1. What memorial have you visited? What did you feel?
2. Honoring the past includes telling difficult stories—can you think of any biblical example of that practice?
3. What examples come to mind when you think of racial injustice in this country? Do you have examples in your own community/context?

Martyrs of the Civil Rights Movement

Along the Civil Rights Trail Memorial are inscribed the names of individuals who lost their lives in the struggle for freedom (1954 to 1968). These martyrs include activists who were targeted for death because of their civil rights work, random victims of vigilantes determined to halt the movement, and individuals who, in the sacrifice of their own lives, brought new awareness to the struggle.

Rev. George Lee, one of the first black people registered to vote in Humphreys County, used his pulpit and his printing press to urge others to vote. White officials offered Lee protection on the condition he end his voter registration efforts, but Lee refused and was murdered on May 7, 1955 in Belzoni, Mississippi.

We remember vividly the four young girls who were killed by a terrorist bomb at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham on September 15, 1963. But history often overlooks Virgil Lamar Ware, 13, who was riding on the handlebars of his brother's bicycle that day when he was fatally shot by white teenagers. The white youths had come from a segregationist rally held in the aftermath of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing.

There is one death that has come to mean much to me personally. Jonathan Myrick Daniels, an Episcopal Seminary student in Boston, had come to Alabama to help with black voter registration in Lowndes County just outside of Selma. He was arrested at a demonstration, jailed in Hayneville and then suddenly released. Moments after his release, he was shot to death by a deputy sheriff on August 20, 1965. He had answered Dr. King's call to join in the movement. He has been named a martyr in the Episcopal Church.

And finally, Wharlest Jackson, the treasurer of his local NAACP chapter in Natchez, TN, was one of many blacks who received threatening Klan notices at his job. After Jackson was promoted to a position previously reserved for whites, a bomb was planted in his car. It exploded minutes after he left work on February 27, 1967, killing him instantly.

They were prophets, willing to lay down their lives. I offer this prayer for all of you who are prophets:

You give us prophets, holy God, to cry out for justice and mercy.
Open our ears to hear them, and to follow the truth they speak, lest we support injustice to secure our own well-being.
Give prophets the fire of your Word, but love as well.
Though they speak for you, may they know that they stand with us before you, and have no Messiah other than your Son, Jesus Christ, the Lord of all. Amen.

—Written by one of the participants

Reflect:

1. Do you know the name(s) of any Christian martyr(s)?
2. What defines martyrdom for you?
3. Who are today's prophets?