

Degrees of Shade

Matthew 10: 34-39

Four years ago Isabel Wilkerson wrote a widely acclaimed book called The Warmth of Other Suns. The title alone should open a well spring of your imagination. Warmth and sun invite different imagery than when thought of together than separately. In colder climates, they are distant memories come winter. In hotter climates, they are forgotten wishes come summer. Of course warmth and the sun are the metaphors for something else. Wilkerson's book is about that great American migration. She relates the narratives of families in the African American community that moved from the South to the North.

Now every time that I have seen that text its always been an effort to explore to explore it. And that's because the migration was a living memory while I was growing up. We experienced it in the shared memories of our families and with the friends of our families. As adult I heard many stories in Chicago where the travel back and forth is routine to this day. In fact, I used to tell people that the best Southern cooking that I'd ever eaten was in Chicago. And up until time I got to Westminster that was the truth.

But over the last few decades there's been a reversal of that movement. I was obviously a part of that movement. I started out twenty-five years ago in the upper extremity of Richmond. What Richmond lacked in geography it made up for in tradition. If you want to see the most exalted figures of the Confederacy, they are not down here but up there – along Monument Boulevard. Soon I was off to Durham for divinity school. And I remained in North Carolina for my early efforts at preaching and pastoring. Country churches with tobacco fields followed by downtown

churches with debutantes. But like many folks, my destination of preference was Atlanta. Atlanta was a magnet in a world where everything else was a nail.

This past Wednesday I had occasion to be in Atlanta. For the past several years, Atlanta has become more and more like another big city. At least to my mind. When I first got there, Atlanta was something else. But while returning home on I-20 I missed my exit. Easy to do during Atlanta's rush hour. Yet, one wonders how many accidental detours are really accidental. I wandered on for a bit in the flow of traffic and then got off at an exit that was close to some colleges. And at that point I made a conscious decision: I decided that I was going to become intentionally lost. That I was going to find my way in midst of not really knowing where I was.

I wonder how many times you've experienced that also? How many times have you decided to pursue a course that was unknown, unfamiliar or unrecognized? That's seems to be a path of life, one that we have to walk from time to time. Sometimes we enter by accident; other times we decide that's the course that has to be taken.

Soon after I exited I found myself driving past Morehouse college, a place once familiar but now barely remembered. The street had become unfamiliar. Not to mention all the buildings that I'd never seen before, most likely because they weren't there before. As I continued driving I stumbled on Paschal's restaurant. Previously, Paschal's restaurant was a small, nondescript but respected restaurant off Martin Luther King Boulevard. That's a place I patronized in my early Atlanta years. My favorite meal there had been corn beef hash, eggs and grits. But there I was at a stop light sitting in front of the new Paschal's restaurant in a new location. When I went inside I discovered a space that was cavernous to my eyes, and then a space that was empty in my stomach, one which I then decided to fill. If you were to ask me what street the restaurant was

on, I couldn't tell you. I could only say that it was across the street from H. J. Russell Construction, another building I'd never seen before.

Now even though the streets and buildings were largely unfamiliar I still had a destination. Like a lot of church folks, through the years I've had worship experiences with different churches. So even though I was preaching Presbyterian sermons and leading Presbyterian worship, there was a church in Atlanta to which I would slip away from time to time. That church was Antioch North. That's the place where I would clap my hands and say amen. So once I found Northside drive I was on my way. And in a few minutes there I was, walking outside their fellowship hall. They were having bible study. But I didn't need to go in, so I didn't go in. I was at peace with my memory of Antioch. And I was at peace with where I am right here, right now.

There were a lot of things that I found interesting in Atlanta. My life revolved around the sacred in Atlanta, but in Atlanta the sacred can get pretty secular. That's true about a lot of places. But if there's one song that represented the early days of my sense of Atlanta, it's a song that was made by Heavyshift. They're British and they were a part of the London Jazz scene. Their biggest hit came out about the same time I got to Atlanta. It was called 90 Degrees in the Shade. When the tune came out I didn't think about the title. I just felt the vibe, the rhythm, and the beat. Of course, years later now I get it. Or I get they way I think I got it. When there's 360 degrees of heat around you, you only need 90 degrees in the shade.

In our reading from Roman's we encounter one of Paul's favorite topics and that is sin. Paul is concerned about sin. Paul is very concerned about sin. In the New Revised Standard Bible from which we read earlier, the English translation has Paul mentioning sin seven times. He writes with phrases such as "should we continue in sin" and "how can we who died in sin go on living

in it.” Paul explains that we are “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Without question Paul is the New Testament's foremost theologian in understanding and explaining the mission of Christ. So much so that his letters are canonized as scripture as you well know. The church is deeply indebted to Paul for his understanding of the Gospel.

Yet a reading of today's Roman text and today Gospel lesson shows some differences. Paul's conversation about death relates to how we have died to sin. Our death to sin through Christ Jesus. But in Matthew, the death that Jesus talks about is not the same. Jesus doesn't really talk about death but instead about the loss of ones' life. The loss of life related to discipleship. The loss of ones' life as the cost of discipleship.

Jesus presents scenarios that are troubling to fathom. And he's graphic in detail. The discipleship he talks about could cost your father or cost your mother. And it could cost your son or cost your daughter. Jesus says if we love our father or mother more than him we're not worthy. And that if we do not take up our cross and follow him we're not worthy. And finally he says that “those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life will find it.”

What Jesus is asking for is a commitment that invites a deep discipleship. A surrendered life that becomes a purposeful life. The life that initiates us into the unknown and the unfamiliar. A life where the path is unclear and the future nebulous. The surrendered life that becomes a purposeful life that becomes a dependent life. A life dependent on faith and the call of Jesus. A dependent life that give us courage we never had, the love we never shared, and the gratitude we never experienced. A dependence on Jesus can make us more than we ever could be, in ways we could have never imagined, and for a purpose which we might never have chosen. Jesus isn't just calling us to be dead to sin and alive in him. He's calling us to a life with possibilities, in a world

with uncertainties, for a purpose that is all his own. And in the process we discover a deeper, richer meaning for our own lives, and for the lives of those around us.

We can always choose to remain in the 90 degrees of shade. Who wouldn't want to. It's cooler in the shade. We're comfortable in the shade. And we'd all like to stay in the shade for as long as we can. But the earth is going to rotate, and we're still going have to get up. And we're going to have to move on. It doesn't matter if we can't see the destination just as long as we can hear his voice. And it doesn't matter if the landmarks aren't familiar as long as we trust the path. This is not just our journey alone, it's also the Lord's journey. For we our still Lord's people, and our keep is still his charge.

In Christ name we pray and through the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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