

“I Hear You”

James 3:13-18

“You had me at ... not hello, but ... at David McCullough’s book John Adams,” I think is what Zoe Sowers told me when I was interviewed for the pastor position here at St. Andrew. I’m glad to be among so many history lovers and readers here at St. Andrew, loving history myself. To be honest, McCullough’s biography of the 2nd U.S. President was one of my earliest ventures into studying American history. I had so covered the waters of church history well enough that I almost went to the University of Chicago to study it, but especially since moving here to Virginia, I’ve had ample opportunity to gladly immerse in and treasure American history. And I love it.

In so doing, I’ll admit to having many gaps to fill in – about Presidents, economics, religion and war. But no gaps have been more surprising than what I’ve found out I don’t know about the history of African Americans in our country. And worse than that, the reason for this is not because of unfilled gaps but because so much of this history has been excluded and left out. That “history is written by the victors” is a well known saying but in this case the intention has been one of silencing the vanquished.

For instance, as many of you know, I went Princeton Theological Seminary, not the same school as the Ivy League Princeton University, but it was right next door and students from both schools could take classes in the other, which I did once, much to my profit. That said, we seminarians still took pride in knowing that Princeton University was originally started by Presbyterians as Log College, with the purpose of training ministers among other things. So as a Princeton alum I held esteem for Woodrow Wilson (a Virginian no less), whose renown included that he was the President of Princeton University previous to becoming the President of the United States. Appropriately, when I was there the School of Public Policy with its statuesque building was named after him.

So I found it strange a few years ago to hear that students were advocating that Wilson’s name should be removed from these places of honor. Or I’ve heard it said this way, what are the five things that any of us know about Woodrow Wilson from our history classes? I pretty much had them down: 1) He was President; 2) during World War 1, 3) that he had risen to the Presidency from his academic leadership position at Princeton University; 4) that he was pacifist which made our nation’s move into World

War 1 quite significant; and 5) that he unsuccessfully tried after that Great War to start the League of Nations, but that the spirit of his aspiration did finally take root after the Second World War in the founding of the United Nations. But I had never heard the racism that was also thoroughly embodied and embraced by the 28th President.

This was evident not only his White House screening and thus his promotion of the 1915 movie called "The Birth of a Nation," a propaganda movie promoting the Ku Klux Klan, ending with a huge Klan march down Pennsylvania Avenue. Effectively worse, however, was Wilson's use of his office to implement Jim Crow segregation laws that undercut voting rights, freedom of movement in the Great Migration of African Americans from the south to the north, the institutionalization of segregated housing and education, all the while making it acceptable to turn a blind eye to horrible crimes against African American citizens. And by the way, Wilson also opposed women's suffrage along which was nevertheless enacted at the end of his Presidency, anyway.

Wow! How did I not know this? How was something so horrid dropped out of the heroism that our history pictured as they spoke of Wilson? How were none of these things known about Wilson compared to the five things we all learned in high school civics?

Yet, Wilson's white supremacy is not the only story so left out of our history curricula. I encourage us all to visit the African American History Museum downtown for an amazingly well presented history, not only of what African Americans endured through the period of their enslavement, but more importantly about what stumbling blocks were put in front of them over and over again ever since the Civil War. Despite the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, African Americans have been made to suffer subservience forced into share cropping, denied their 40 acres and a goat, enforced by vagrancy laws that made prisoners out of nonconformists who were hired out for hard labor. Voting rights briefly extended to all citizens were almost immediately stolen by means of literacy requirements and the threat of lynching. Movement to the northern cities met with redlining restrictions that crowded African Americans into dense and shoddy housing, education was denied by Jim Crow laws that mocked them with separate but equal justifications for exclusion.

We are struggling with our kids having to distance learn due to Covid-19 this year. My heart is going out to our families in the church and beyond who have the unenviable challenge of juggling telework with supporting your kids getting online instruction. I'm praying for those of you who are teaching by this means (and the school boards who have to assess how to make decisions between choices bad and worse). I'm wondering how we as a church could support our kids who grieve the loss of friends

and the chance to be at schools where so much happens well beyond the three “r’s”: reading, riting and ‘rithmetic.

But listen to this. In 1954, the NAACP successfully challenged the separate but equal laws that segregated African American kids from white kids. *Brown v. the Board of Education* restored rights denied to African Americans by laws that maintained a façade of equality but, in fact, perpetuated an exclusion from life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And you would have thought that this was the end of the matter. But no. Actually, in some ways the result might have made things even worse.

Many states, many counties, did something quite radical to resist change. They closed the public schools! In order to stop black kids from being allowed in white kids’ buildings, we won’t let anyone in the building. Loudoun County schools kept integration from happening for 13 school years, not welcoming African American students until 1968. In Prince Edward County, which tried but failed to fund private schools from public taxes, black kids were made to wait five years to go back to school, the public schools closed.

Carol Anderson, a historian at Emory University in Atlanta, writes of what effects this denial had on all students in Prince Edward County. All of this happened at the very time that the space race was beginning. Sputnik was sent into orbit by the Russians and we were hard pressed as Americans to keep up. As such, this was a time when work was at tipping point moving from what one did with brawn to what one did with brains. In 1957, the United States had 40% of the world’s engineers. In 2012, we had 15%. In other words, just at the time when transformation was in front of us, we decided instead to put everything we could into denying equal educational opportunities to a portion of our citizens because of race and racism. As an interesting aside, polls taken in Prince Edward county today show that the number one occupation in the county is “cook and food preparation worker.”

The Book of James has some of the most memorable phrases, worthy of our attention as we seek to live and contribute to one another wisely and generously. I love this measure for how to assess whether we are acting wisely in today’s passage: “The wisdom from above which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.” I’m so glad that Donna Bohanon has been with us to share today. She is truly a woman of kindness, soft spoken and gentle, embodying the kind of wisdom that James puts out for all of us to seek. Her history lesson wasn’t one of deprivation or grievance, but a testimony of resilience and faithfulness. “I hear you,” Donna – and thank you for sharing. Yours is a history that I haven’t had the ears to hear or the eyes to see. I need to open them both

and relearn. Hearing that history is a way to open up a much more hopeful and righteous history in the future. Amen.