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July 24, 2022

Look What I Found!
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A friend of mine named Levi is really good at finding things. On his coffee table sits a case displaying a large collection of the most perfect arrowheads I have ever seen outside a museum. Levi grew up in Lee County, Iowa, which is located in an extreme southeastern pocket of rolling prairie wedged between the Mississippi River to the east and the state of Missouri to the south. When he visits his family still living there, Levi spends hours walking the fields, the woods, and stream beds looking down. Some of his artifacts are razor sharp blades that would have been the tip of a spear. Others are larger implements used for cooking or other chores. Some are blunted by the impact of hard work and repeated use, others rounded off in generations of rain and composted wildflowers. Arrowheads like those in Levi's collection can be more than 10,000 years old. It's likely he's the first person to touch them since the last person who used them.

Arrowheads aren't the only things Levi is good at finding. He's also a highly accomplished forager of morel mushrooms. For a few weeks in the spring, these precious mushrooms grow wild if you know where to look for them. The heat, moisture, and light all have to be just right for just a few weeks for them to spawn. I don't have the patience or the good timing to find my own supply, but every year Levi always has enough to share. His source is a closely guarded secret, presumed to be somewhere in the Ledges State Park west of Ames.

I've asked Levi to explain himself. Not to give away the location of the precious goods but just to describe his technique. How do you find all these things that are so good at hiding in plain sight? How many other people have walked right by them or trampled them underfoot without a second glance? Levi says he doesn't have a special sense for this. He's no truffle pig. He just considers what might be the right conditions. He tries to look in the likely places, and then he just spends the time - walking, looking, exploring. The virtue of looking closely for a sustained period of time is not a natural talent of mine. It doesn't come easy to me. But it is a practice that can be cultivated.

And I'm learning that it's a practice that is deeply needed for good listening, for faithful remembering, and for honest being in community with each other. Maybe you know that a small group of us from the church took part last weekend in what's called the Durham Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope. It is meant to be a sacred journey through the African American experience in the city of Durham. Beginning at Stagville, the plantation owned by the Cameron family that enslaved more than 1,000 people, the pilgrimage continues through downtown Durham, the site of Black Wall Street, and on to the Hayti neighborhood that was destroyed by the urban renewal movement. I found that all of these places rewarded sustained attention, slow walking, and committed looking and listening.

At Stagville, we heard from a public historian who helps to interpret the history of the plantation. Going to Stagville is sort of like visiting Monticello, only you don't have to drive three hours to get there. And at Stagville the tour guides don't have to eulogize the Founding Fathers. And so you're free to imagine what would this place have been like to those who lived here? What would this place have felt like to those enslaved here?

Looking closely, we talked about the big white plantation house. It was placed at the top of an open hill so that it could look out over acres of fields. Its location was meant to serve the purpose of surveillance to protect the white landowners. We talked about how the business transacted in this home would have affected the lives of the people who were enslaved there, how humans were bought and sold at the table, how families were separated in the decisions made there. The historians who study Stagville have access to archived letters that tell the story of the slaveholding owners. But they have to look harder to see the experience of the people who lived on this land and could not read or write. One of the most powerful artifacts shared with us last weekend was a cowrie shell that had been found underneath the slave quarters. Cowrie shells are not found in the Atlantic. They come from the Indian Ocean, where they were kept and traded across the African continent. That shell belonged to someone enslaved at Stagville and it was brought here from the African continent. Can you imagine its journey from West Africa across the Atlantic to a crowded cabin six miles north of Durham?

On Saturday morning we took a long walk around downtown Durham. We walked through the glitzy new apartment buildings and past the busy downtown farmer's market to gaze at the mural of Pauli Murray. We visited the Carolina Theater, where Black people were served at a separate ticket office and climbed ninety steps to sit in the balcony until segregation ended in 1963. We ambled down Parrish Street, also known as Black Wall Street, home to the businesses making possible the first wealth accrued by free Blacks in our region. We looked up at the Merchant and Farmer's Bank building, richly detailed in gold brick. We sat down in the Mutual Life Insurance Tower, a skyscraper built by the largest African American insurance company in the country. Our day ended in the Hayti neighborhood, where we listened to Margaret Smith describe how the urban renewal movement, which paved highway 147 through a historic African American neighborhood, displaced people from their homes and destroyed the fabric of a rich community life. In one of the little marks of serendipity on this journey, Ms. Smith is a member of Fisher Memorial United Holiness Church. It was such a powerful experience for us to hear how our church partner through United Voices of Praise is so deeply embedded in the history of Hayti and has been so profoundly touched by the racial political history of the city of Durham.

I have to be careful here not to make this sermon a tourist's travelog. My point is only that there is so much more to notice than we usually take the time to see. There are rather few occasions when I am careful to look so deeply and to listen so closely as I did last weekend. It was even more powerful to have space for reflection and discussion with faithful people in the church. It's so tempting for us to approach racism as a problem to be solved or a justice issue to be overcome. And we work so hard at it. Attending lectures and workshops. Confronting ourselves and each other with the telltale signs of our privilege. Hiring consultants to correct us

and guide us. There is a place for all that. But dealing with racism means more than “doing the work” as they say. It’s about being there flesh and blood, or in the words of Jesus - heart, soul, strength, and mind. To be on a pilgrimage is to learn to love the process of getting where we’re going. It’s not just the destination that matters, but the journey itself. Who are you with? What are the places that you pass through? What do you see with your eyes? What do you feel with your heart? Paul writes to the Roman church that the grace we receive is not by means of “effort or exertion,” but rather comes from God who shows mercy.

That’s how Levi finds all those arrowheads. That’s why he gets to eat so many precious wild mushrooms. He puts in the work, I guess you could say. But by equal measure he loves being in the field and in the forest. His joy is in being on the journey. What he finds along the way are these little prizes that reward his love for the place and his presence to the process. The arrowheads and mushrooms are his. For me, it’s the cowrie shell I saw with my own eyes. It’s the fingerprints pressed into the brick at Stagville. The connection with Ms. Smith at Hayti, the meal shared with Alex, the walk across the highway with Midge. These are the prizes of a pilgrim, the keepsakes of a sacred journey.