

Chude Allen

Mennonite Church, January 20, 2019

On June 9, 1964 I stood in front of the pews of an Episcopal church in a small town in Pennsylvania. I was about to go to Mississippi to be a freedom school teacher as part of what is now called Freedom Summer. I asked the parishioners for donations and their prayers.

When I was in Mississippi I wrote my parents that when I returned I wanted to speak again in the church, that I believed God would speak through me. My minister, however, would not allow me to speak during a service, only in the parish hall at an evening educational. Today is only the second time ever I have spoken during worship. Of course Spirit does not only appear in places of worship, but there was and is a power that comes when we join together in acknowledgement of something greater than ourselves.

That morning in June I spoke at the eight o'clock service and again, at eleven, about my experience as an exchange student at Spelman College, a black women's college in Atlanta, Georgia. I went south brimming over with life and energy. I was rejected as a northern, white do-gooder.

*I learned what it meant to be the object of hostility and suspicion, I told the parishioners. I knew what it meant to feel alone. I knew what it meant to walk across campus, afraid to smile because I feared rejection... to feel inadequate as a person. And what it meant to wish my skin was a different color so that I would be accepted for me and so that I would not have to feel guilt every time a white man committed an injustice.*

*But I also learned what it meant to have real friends. ... And somewhere along the way I learned how to forgive - to forgive not just others but myself.*

I want to talk this morning about that experience at Spelman and in the freedom movement in Atlanta. Until I went south, I hadn't grasped the full meaning of my heritage. I'd been taught to be proud of where I'd come from and what my ancestors had done. But in Atlanta, I became ashamed.

I was ashamed of being connected to racist white men and women and to their meanness, greed and violence. I was ashamed of the silence on the part of so-called good white people. And I was ashamed of my incredible ignorance about my own people and my arrogance in thinking ours was a culture others should emulate. At Spelman I was forced to confront who I was. That included recognizing the ways racism and privilege had warped me.

Vincent Harding, whom I was privileged to meet and hear speak, said in his long interview with your pastor, Joanna, *You're not always just looking at the enemy or the enemy structures or the enemy politics. At every moment you're looking at yourself*