

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*

*and asking who you are... I think that when nonviolent resistance is at its best it's living that double life of struggle within and struggle outside.*

That was profoundly true for me. I have the letters I sent home to my parents. In them I see reflected the two aspects of being in the freedom movement. I wrote about what I was learning about our society and what I was learning about myself.

Over the years I have developed a respect for this young woman who was trying to make sense out of her experience as a white student learning about racism. I am incredibly grateful to the southern freedom movement that required facing oneself as well as challenging laws and customs. I felt as if I'd been tempered by fire. I looked up the word *tempered* and was surprised to discover one meaning includes being made flexible. I can see how apt that is. I had become more elastic in my perspective, able to see from the bottom up, not just the top down. But at the time I thought in terms of having impurities burned away.

And where was God as I suffered the pains of learning the truth about racism as it manifested in me and in society? Over and over again I lost my sense of God's love and felt bereft. Alone. Yet when I couldn't touch God's love, I could find it in the Movement. By the time I made the decision to go to Mississippi, I knew that God wanted me to go and would be with me.

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I want to share a poem I wrote about my experience of a mass meeting.

For Justice and For Love  
*(For the young woman I once was)*

I stand in the balcony of the church,  
which is filled with people singing.  
Mine is one of a few white faces  
scattered around the church.  
Yet, at this moment  
I am not conscious of being white.

My attention is on the spirit,  
the feelings of hope and courage  
that are building  
in this predominantly black crowd  
as everyone sings.  
My heart is opening to a palpable,  
collective cry for a world of love and justice.

I have been told all my life  
that I cannot sing.  
But the thin brown-skinned man  
at the front of the church  
has told the audience,  
"If you can't reach the note,  
sing louder!"

and I am singing  
*Oh, freedom!* at the top of my lungs.  
The singing ends.  
The group quiets and sits down.  
I sit with the others.  
A woman moves to the pulpit  
and begins to speak.

She has dark brown skin  
and seems to be a few years older than I.  
Her voice is strong  
and her words impassioned.  
Everyone is focused  
on what she has to say.

It is hot in the church.  
People wave paper fans  
in front of their faces,  
cardboard rectangles with a picture  
of a white-looking Jesus on one side.  
Jesus has shoulder length wavy brown hair.  
He is holding a lamb.

The background is brown.  
Throughout the church  
brown colored fans wave,  
as if on a breeze.

I reach toward the pew in front of me  
and lift out a cardboard fan from the rack.  
The other side has a drawing of a building  
and the address and telephone number  
of a black funeral home in segregated Atlanta.

I wave the fan in front of my face,  
but I am not used to using a fan  
and it distracts me

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from what the woman is saying.  
Putting the fan back in its holder,  
I settle into the pew.

My shoulders touch those  
of the students sitting next to me.  
Perspiration trickles down my sides.  
I smell hair preparations and sweat.

Here in the balcony of this church  
listening to the speaker,  
I know God is present.  
I feel Him in my heart and in the room.  
God is love and love fills this great space.

Faces glow with this love.  
People's edges disappear.  
I feel a unity, a oneness,  
and know it is good  
and beyond good.

Every fiber of my being knows  
this openness of self, this surrender  
to God who is love,  
is what it means to be fully human.

I am neither white nor not white.  
The people around me  
are neither black nor not black.  
We are all beautiful.  
We are all children of God.

In this moment I am not afraid  
of beatings or death.  
Should my body be killed,  
my spirit will live on  
in the bones and marrow of the people here,  
even as they will live forever within me.

I am determined to fight  
for justice and for love.