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**Journey of Love**

Luke 9:51

Eleven years after the founding of Jamestown the first European women arrived in the colony. On my recent trip to Virginia I discovered that I have an ancestor who made that journey. Alice Bennet came to Jamestown in 1618 with her husband who died within a few years. She remarried in 1624. The following year she testified before the Governor's Council of Virginia, which was conducting an inquiry into the gruesome death of an indentured servant named Elizabeth Abbott. Alice Bennet's testimony was an act of great courage because it exposed the sadistic behavior of a powerful member of that council, a man named John Proctor.

Alice lived near the Proctors. In her testimony she told of two occasions when she found Elizabeth Abbott after she had been severely beaten. Alice described in graphic detail the wounds that covered the woman's body. Her description of the wounds was consistent with the reports of other witnesses who spoke of seeing the young woman receive hundreds of lashes from a whip that had fish hooks attached to it. The beatings were administered by other servants who were warned that they would be whipped if they refused. With the help of her husband Alice carried Elizabeth Abbott home, nursed her wounds, and then as the law required, delivered the woman back to John Proctor.

The testimony offered at the inquest fell into two categories. There were those like Alice Bennet who told of the cruel beatings inflicted on this young woman and other indentured servants in the Proctor household. Others offered testimony which was more to the liking of John Proctor. They described Elizabeth as a "lewd wench" who could not be "corrected" using conventional methods. These witnesses suggested that she did not die of her horrendous wounds but from exposure when she disobeyed and ran away and hid in the woods.

The most interesting part of Alice Bennet's testimony concerned a conversation that she had with John Proctor the second time she returned the young woman to his care. Daring to speak truth to power she told this prominent man that it was his Christian duty to put an end to these beatings. Instead of correcting her in this brutal fashion he should forgive her for whatever she had done wrong. Proctor answered that he would not forgive. That is a road that he did not want to travel.

In the ninth chapter of Luke Jesus is on a road that many do not wish to take. Luke tells us that the time had come for Jesus to finish the journey that defined his life. He had "set his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51)." In Jerusalem he would demonstrate the quality of his love and the depth of God's forgiveness by his death on the cross. Luke tells us that along the way Jesus and the disciples encounter many who are given the opportunity to be part of this journey. They come to a Samaritan village where Jesus hopes to rest and engage the people. But they refuse to receive him. This rejection may have something to do with the racial tension between Jews and Samaritans. But Luke also points out that the Samaritans know he is going to Jerusalem and they want no part of his mission.

Luke then tells of others that they meet along the road. Here there seems to be a pattern of an initial positive response to Jesus which turns into equivocation when people learn what Jesus is really doing. The dead have to be buried and families have to be attended to. Jesus' journey of love will just

have to wait. Luke wants his readers to understand that the journey of love continues. The invitation is still before us. We all have to decide if we are ready to be part of Jesus' journey of love or whether we choose to continue living for ourselves.

The apostle Paul makes a similar point in the fifth chapter of Galatians. There he writes about the call to freedom. He argues that those who believe freedom is about doing what we want miss the point. For Paul freedom means being delivered from the bondage of destructive ways of life. Paul was especially concerned about the interpretation of Jewish law that prohibited fellowship between Jews and Gentiles. Paul wanted his people to break free from that destructive law so that they could embrace Jesus' law of love. By this law we are called to serve the needs of others. Indeed, Paul goes so far as to say that through love we "become slaves to one another (Galatians 5:13)."

Paul's vision of the gospel explodes the world of John Proctor and his many spiritual descendents. Proctor would not forgive because he had gone too far down the road of indulging his penchant for cruelty. But he may also have feared the power of love to call his exalted position of privilege into question. As we cling to our own patterns of self-indulgence we have reasons of our own to share his fear. The truth is that we all have reasons for not joining Jesus on his journey.

The journey of love confronts us in ways we least expect. Gene Cheek has written a memoir called *The Color of Love*. In it he describes how deeply wounded he was by an abusive father. He and his mother had been repeatedly beaten by his father. His mother finally succeeded in breaking away from this destructive marriage. She established a new home where she and her son could be safe. But one day Cheek's father found a devastating way to retaliate. When he learned that his former wife had begun going out with a generous and gracious African American man, he took her to court. He made use of the archaic laws of that state which prohibited relationships between men and women across racial lines. He succeeded in doing what would hurt his former wife the most. The court removed their twelve year old son from her custody and placed him in a foster home. Years later, out of a profound sense of bitterness, Cheek began writing about his experience. He concluded his memoir with these words:

This book started as an act of vengeance. I wanted revenge on those—long since gone—who brought pain to my family and me. It changed from revenge to understanding and finally to forgiveness. I can't pinpoint the exact time because it moved over me like the changing of a season, slow and deliberate. It wasn't until this process was near the end that I even noticed, but I am grateful for it (quoted by L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Century*, February 20, 2007, page 41).

By God's grace we can make that journey.