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Sharing the Journey

Matthew 15:15

Last March I was able to spend three day's in Chester County, South Carolina. I was there to learn more about my ancestors who left that county to come to Illinois in 1842. The highlight of that trip was a visit to a cemetery that was very difficult to find. I wanted to visit Paul's Graveyard because seven of my ancestors were buried there between 1791 and 1840.

I thought I had good directions. The graveyard was six miles south of Richburg on State Highway 901 at an intersection with a county road. I knew to look for an old Oak Grove near this intersection. What I did not know was that rural housing developments had popped up all around the Oak Grove so that it could not be seen from the road. Twice we stopped to ask people for directions. In both cases they knew exactly where it was but they did not know how to direct a stranger. The landmarks that were so familiar to them meant nothing to us. The third time that we stopped to ask for help we were close enough that the resident said, "Let me take you to it." We had to cross someone's backyard to find the path through the Oak Grove leading into the graveyard.

When we spoke to local residents about directions to the graveyard we heard several times that it was a place that children loved. One man spoke of playing there when he was a child sixty years ago. Another described how his grandchildren love to go there. When we penetrated the grove to find the uniformly thin and tall stone slabs we understood why children were so entranced by the place. In the shadows of the towering oaks and among the uncleared brush this seemed like a world apart. I found my ancestors' stones. As I worked to decipher the weathered carvings I began to reflect on what the stones said about who these people were. I was particularly fascinated by the 1820 gravestone of John Lynne, Sr. This is what it said:

In the year 1771
He emigrated from Ireland
And sustained a share in
The troubles of
the revolutionary war
For freedom

Here was a man who wanted future generations to know that he had paid a price in money and/or blood for the birth of a new nation. This stone was a public declaration of who he was and the difference his life had made.

In the 16th chapter of Matthew's gospel we find Jesus challenging his followers to make a similar declaration. After arriving in the district of Caesarea Philippi Jesus called the disciples together and asked them, "Who do people say that the son of Man is (Matthew 16:13)?" This question was not so difficult. They had heard people express all kinds of opinions about Jesus. They simply repeated what they had heard. Some said that Jesus was like John the Baptist. Others compared him to Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. The disciples were too tactful to repeat some of the more insulting names that had been assigned to their teacher.

But then Jesus asked a question for which the disciples were not at all prepared. He said, “But who do you say that I am (Matthew 16:15)?” Jesus was asking the disciples to give an answer that he himself had not provided. Up to this point the disciples had been busy taking notes and memorizing the teaching of their rabbi. That is what a disciple was supposed to do. Now Jesus was calling on them to go beyond the passive role of a disciple and draw their own conclusions. The disciples were really on the spot because the question was not just about Jesus. It was also about them. The answer they give will reveal who they are as human beings. Jesus was asking them to stake their lives on the mission God had given to him.

It is Peter who speaks for the other disciples when he says, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God (Matthew 16:16).” But as soon as Peter says this, it becomes clear how profoundly he misunderstands what the Lordship of Christ means. When Jesus speaks of making the ultimate gift by pouring his life out on a cross, Peter is offended. This violates Peter’s cultural understanding of the messiah as the commander in chief who never loses a war. But Jesus rebukes Peter for affirming the world as it is. God has a much different kind of world in mind. Jesus will undergo trouble and suffering to bring it into being. Jesus is inviting his followers to “sustain a share in the troubles” of building the world that God has in mind. This is our way of declaring who we are.

In the 12th chapter of Romans Paul outlines what it means to have a share in the world that God intends. Paul asks that each member of the church at Rome offer his or her gifts to make God’s grace come alive in our world. The church becomes a transforming community when each one takes a share in the journey of discipleship. Registration Sunday is a day when we celebrate this truth about the church. When you turn in your registration form you are sustaining a share in what God is doing in this place.

As I explored the stones in Paul’s Graveyard, I realized that the people buried there had a profound understanding of this truth about the church. They knew that creating a new nation was not enough. They knew that God wanted more from them. God was calling them to confront the evil of slavery in America. This meant that there were more troubles for which they must sustain a share.

Living in South Carolina meant that they knew firsthand what slavery was all about. Like all successful business people in that region, they owned slaves. But when their ministers told them God wanted a different kind of world they listened. There would be no easy way for them to opt out of the slave culture. The anti-slavery policy of the Reformed Presbyterian Church said that it wasn’t good enough to return the merchandise and get their money back. Selling a slave was as evil as owning one. The only way out was to set their slaves free. In 1802 they had a very unusual registration Sunday. On that day they gathered to release their slaves who represented a \$15,000 investment. It was an action by which they declared who they were.

But not even that was enough for people who had a share in what God was doing in the world. As I looked around the graveyard I noticed very few graves after 1840. They were sending their children West to chart a new course in states that slavery did not rule. These children would one day fill the cemeteries of Illinois and Indiana as interments in Paul’s Graveyard become increasingly rare. They believed that their children also had a share in the world God was bringing into being. They made sure their children were ready for a new dawn of freedom that they would never see.

Registration Sunday is a reminder that we are called to a similar task. As we affirm our faith in Christ we take a share in a work that will continue when children are playing around our graves. Now is the time to declare who we are.