

Christoph Keller, III
Episcopal Collegiate School
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Holy Wednesday

After graduating from Central High in 1973, I went north to Amherst College. I wanted small classes, and snow. The girl I loved stayed home and went to Hendrix, and that was hard.

At Amherst, in freshman English we were assigned a book titled *Coming of Age in Mississippi*. The author, Anne Moody, was African American. Born in 1940, she grew up black when southern blacks were locked down tight under Jim Crow laws and the always-present threat of violence. As a young woman, Anne joined the movement to face the threat and overturn the laws.

I was eager to read this assignment, because part of my growing-up had been in Mississippi too. My father was an Episcopal priest. When I was seven years old, he accepted a call to St. Andrew's Church in Jackson, Mississippi. The year was 1962.

When we arrived in Jackson, the "Civil Rights Movement" was gathering force. "Civil Rights," in those days, meant the right of black Americans to eat in restaurants, swim in public pools, sleep in hotels, and go to movies. It meant the right to vote, and enroll in public universities like Ole Miss. Up to then, all those rights had been denied.

Looking back from 2011, the fact that we white southerners had ever denied such basic rights to blacks is both shameful to remember and difficult to understand. How could people have done something so obviously wrong?

I think of it as a problem of the difference between "true north" and "magnetic" north. I used to fly airplanes. Learning to fly, I was taught that the magnetic attraction from the North Pole is several degrees off-center from the actual top of the world. In Arkansas, if I follow my magnetic compass thinking it is leading me to Harrison, I might wind up in Mountain Home. So pilots learn the difference between true and magnetic north, and make adjustments.

It is like that with our moral values. We take our moral cues from those around us. This is both for better and for worse. The people we admire show us how to be good. When a bad idea sets in among the people we admire, we absorb it and think of it as good. Magnetic north—the values of people we admire—may draw us away from the true measure of the difference between right and wrong.

In the history of books, no one has shown this better than Mark Twain does in *Huckleberry Finn*. All the good white folks in Huck's home-town believed that helping a slave escape was just plain wrong. So, Huck both believes that, and feels it in his heart. Thus, when he decides he will help Jim escape from slavery, he believes

and feels he's doing something very wrong, the kind of thing a boy would go to hell for. "All right then, I'll go to hell," he says.

When a gangster informs the cops who killed a little girl in a drive-by shooting; when a fraternity brother tells the Dean who made the pledge drink so much it almost killed the boy—both feel they are doing something wrong. That is what magnetic north can do.

Three years ago, I took my daughter up to Washington and Lee. Moving her in the freshman dorm, we walked by the church on campus. I'm just guessing, but I doubt many students there get up and out to church on Sunday. On college campuses, magnetic north doesn't point to church these days. So I nodded toward the church, saying, "Mary Olive, to find true north, you'll need to go inside."

Now back to me at Amherst, reading *Coming of Age in Mississippi*.

As I turn the pages, the story of the Civil Rights movement unfolds through its progressions: Rosa Parks in 1955; Little Rock in 1957; in 1961, the Freedom Rides; James Meredith enters Ole Miss in 1962. One June 12, 1963, in Jackson, a young black man named Medgar Evers is murdered by a member of the Ku Klux Klan.

As I read Anne Moody's description of these events, the unfolding scenario becomes increasingly familiar. I remember James Meredith entering Ole Miss, his path blocked by Governor Ross Barnett. I remember Medgar Evers' murder. And I remember our church, St. Andrew's, and realize where her story's leading.

Anne writes that she and a team of volunteers decide to integrate the Jackson churches. That is correct: the churches were segregated too. The volunteers divide into teams of two and spread out on Sunday morning, visiting white churches—Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Christian Church Disciples. At each church, they ask to come in and worship Christ. At each church, they are turned away.

In my room, in my chair, at Amherst, I know that next they are coming to St. Andrew's.

As Anne and a companion arrive, they are welcomed in. They find that two other black women had arrived earlier and are already inside, seated. The service begins. At the sermon, my father preaches on the text from the First Epistle of John: "If a man say "I love God" and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"

According to newspapers, the sermon was about how far America had come with respect to launching rockets, putting astronauts in space, and how far we had to go with respect to this message in John's epistle. Then my father prayed: "God help us."

When the service ended, the visitors filed out of church. Anne Moody wrote that, at the door, the minister shook her hand, saying: "Come again." She added this: "He said it like he meant it and I began to have a little hope."

Just recently, I discovered a letter to my father from another member of that group.

Dear Rev. Keller:

For the past two weeks I have been debating the question of whether or not to write to you. But now my mind is clear and I can write and thank you and the members of your church for the much-looked-for welcome and courtesy extended to me and to the other girls who came with me to Morning Prayer at your church on June 16TH.

I am Episcopalian and for a long time I have wanted to attend a beautiful Episcopal service such as the one we attended. I did not like having to come at such a tense time. Rather I would have wanted to come when there was no pressure and no tension on either side. Because of the times I was left worried and uneasy, which accounts for such a lapse in time between our visit to your church and my letter to you.

I want to come back, not as one coming in defiance of Southern tradition but because the spirit of the service and the feelings in my heart are pulling me.

This situation in Mississippi has caused a touchiness which can be felt on both sides. It was due to come one way or another, but I hope, as I know most people do, that the situation will be solved by Christian people who respect the human dignity of all men, regardless of race or color.

Again, I thank you for your welcome. I hope that your welcome will radiate throughout the city and state, for in the sight of God, all men are brothers.

Most sincerely,

D. Camille Wilburn

In 1967, my father was elected Bishop of Arkansas, and we moved here. At Amherst, I majored in American Studies, with a focus on race and Civil Rights in the history of the south. I graduated in 1977, and came straight home to Arkansas. I asked the girl from Hendrix if she would marry me, and she said "yes."