

There is more than one history in the South

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I often worship and preach in a sanctuary without windows. Renaissance Presbyterian Church is an African-American congregation in Chattanooga, Tennessee. They built the structure, brick upon brick, so that it might withstand bombs, shooting, or burning. Stained glass gave way to safety, so when I stand in the pulpit, I always remember where I am.

Lately, when I travel and explain that I'm from Chattanooga, Tennessee, I get one response: "Oh. The South. It's so racist down there. How can you live there?" I suppose it makes us feel better to imagine that our country's hatred has been distilled and segregated into one geographic region.

I nod, and agree, "Yes, it's racist."

I fully acknowledge that I am product of that racist heritage. I'll never forget that one night my father said the "n" word. I was an adult, so I asked him to never say that word. Then he started spewing out a racist joke.

I begged him to stop, and he kept at it, like a small boy torturing a dying kitten. He told another one. And another one. I kept pleading with him, hoping he would apologize and redeem himself in some way. But the more upset I got, the more delighted he became, and he never stopped.

I don't know why I didn't get up immediately. I felt like his soul was at stake, and I needed for him to repent. For his sake, and somehow for mine, I needed my father to not be *that* man. But he wouldn't stop. And through my begging, I had to acknowledge that he was that man.

Finally, I broke. I began crying, but I didn't want to be vulnerable in front of such bile. I didn't want him to know that he could hurt me. I ran to my room with tears streaming down my face and cried for the rest of the night. The tears didn't stop him. It made him jeer more, and the peals of laughter following me to my room.

On my father's deathbed, he told my sister that I would never forgive him for that night. Forgiveness is complicated, but I always seek to forgive. I pray for the strength to love. I feel that I have let it go, and will keep letting it go as my anger rises. But there was a sense that on that night, my father became someone else. Our history and relationship became tainted with that hate he threw up. I feel some satisfaction in the fact that his cruelty haunted him to his grave. I know that God will have more mercy on his soul than I have been able to muster.

So, here I am in the South, bound up in this history, where some people exclaim that the confederate flag has nothing to do with race. Here I am, where a string of black churches are burning, and people say, "There is no evidence of a hate crime."

But here's the thing. (My friend, Michael Gilliam, explained this in a radio interview recently.) There is more than one heritage in the South; there is more than one story. Yes, there is a history of racism that poisons this land, but that is not the only history here. There are also the spiritual writings of Howard Thurman, who was born two hours away from where I was born. There are the powerful words of Zora Neale Hurston, who was a librarian where I checked out books. We have the poetry of Langston Hughes. It is also a hotbed for the Civil Rights movement, black liberation theology, and womanist theology. We have Moral Mondays. There is a history of Black preaching that soars through churches and makes the white supremacists fear so much that they think burning down a building will stop the movement, but they are wrong. Bullets and martyrs will not stop the conviction that Black Lives Matter.

And so I listen to that history. The one that takes down flags while quoting scripture, the one that builds sanctuaries even without the windows, the one that sings, "we will not be moved." Because that pulsing, liberating movement is the South too.