

## “The Sleepers’ Car”

Rev. Stephen Milton,  
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This month in Florida, the police arrived at an elementary school where they had been told there was a dangerous individual who had been violent. The individual had been physically lashing out at others and school property in a way the teachers and principal found threatening.

So the police arrived and took this person into custody. Her name is Nadia. She is a six year old African American. She had experienced a temper tantrum, but by the time the police arrived, she had calmed down. She asked the police as they put her into the car, are we going on a field trip? Their actual destination was a psychiatric facility where she was detained for 48 hours. Her mother, also an African American, was not asked if this was ok, and was furious and horrified. She only saw her daughter after 7 hours.<sup>i</sup>



Many commentators quickly pointed out that perceiving a Black little girl as a threat fits into the overall history of racism in the United States. Fear of violent Black people has been a continuing theme for the past few centuries in America. Usually the victim of this racism are black men, who get roughed up or killed by the police. But this time, it was a little girl.

As Canadians, we look at this, shake our heads. It is tempting to write it off as yet another example of American racism at work. But the fact is that in 2016, almost exactly the same thing happened here, in Mississauga. A six year old Black child, weighing all of 48 pounds, had a temper tantrum at school. The school staff called the police. To control the girl, the police put the child in handcuffs on her feet and on her hands. That happened here. In 2016.<sup>ii</sup>

As Canadians, many of us are shocked to hear that such racist incidents can happen here in our country. We see ourselves as better than the Americans when it comes to our relationship with Black people. Much of our pride comes from what happened here in the 1800s with the underground railroad. For many of us, it is the most famous and best known aspect of Canadian Black history. It is seen as proof that unlike the Americans, Canada has always been a safe place for Blacks. We pride ourselves on our tolerance, that we aren't as racist as the Americans. It is part of our cultural identity. Since this is Black History Month, I would like to talk this morning about why we feel that way. I will be exploring a chapter in Canadian Black history that we don't hear much about, namely, what happened when African Americans tried to come to Canada after the Civil War ended. This is the story of what happened after the underground railway ended, and Blacks wanted to take real railways to Canada.

To tell that story, we have to start in the United States. The American Civil War ended in 1865. Slavery was now illegal. African Americans in the South were free to be farmers, teachers,

doctors, and elected officials. This did not sit well with Southern whites. Their racism had not been defeated by the war, just the institution of slavery. So, slowly, their racism took a new form.



Towns and cities developed a new system of racial oppression and exclusion called Jim Crow. It is also known as segregation. Blacks were told to keep to certain parts of town, and to stay out of stores, restaurants and parks frequented by whites. This evolved spontaneously, and then was slowly put into law, state by state.

Our society is defined by its faith in progress, so we like to think that bad ideas and practices like racism will go away as we become more advanced as a society. We assume that just as our technology keeps getting better, we are getting better too, moving beyond old oppressive ideas like racism. But today's gospel passage suggests that when it comes to evil, different rules apply.

In today's scripture reading (Luke 11:14-26), we heard of Christ exorcising an evil spirit which had made someone mute. He cures the man, but later in the passage, Jesus tells us that just because a spirit has been expelled by a strong man, it doesn't mean the evil spirit won't come back. Evil spirits may wander through the deserts, looking for a new place to live. They can even return to the same house they left, which has been all cleaned up, and bring even worse spirits back in if the house is not protected. Christ's point is that when you defeat evil, don't kid yourself – it will be back. It wants to survive. The urge to lie about other people, to pretend that one group is better than another, is not going to go away on its own. It will keep coming back. It's up to us to stay vigilant, to keep it out.

That's certainly what happened in the U.S. The strong man of the North conquered the southern slavery system. But the Civil War didn't conquer racism. It survived, and reasserted itself through segregation. In fact, in 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the legality of Jim Crow segregation practices. But that was also the same year that Canada appeared to provide some hope to African Americans. In 1896, Canada offered 160 acres of free land to anyone who came to farm in Alberta and Saskatchewan.<sup>iii</sup> This offer would bring 2 million people to settle the West over the next few decades. And this promise of free land sounded like a dream come true to many African American farmers who were fed up with America's new form of racism.<sup>iv</sup>

But when African Americans arrived by train to settle, they quickly encountered the same evil spirit of racism they had left back home. In Edmonton, the all-white Board of Trade and the local newspapers sounded the alarm that the black peril was arriving in Canada. The head of the board of trade wrote to the federal government that "it has been proven in the United States that negroes and whites cannot live in proximity without the occurrence of revolting

lawlessness , and the development of bitter race hatred.”<sup>v</sup> The logic of their argument was bizarre – they blamed the victims of racial violence for the violence itself. It was much like blaming a woman for being raped because of the way she dresses. The easiest way to prevent interracial violence from erupting in Canada, they argued, was to keep Blacks out.

By the early 1900s, the federal government started to change its immigration policies to make it difficult for Blacks to enter the country. New rules were instituted – white settlers needed to arrive at the border with 25 dollars in cash, but Blacks would need 500.<sup>vi</sup> Doctors were told to go to the border where they would earn five dollars for every Black person they could turn away on any medical pretext. Any hint of illness, even pregnancy, was just cause for blocking the border to Black people.<sup>vii</sup>

In 1911, the Laurier government passed an order in council formally forbidding any Black person from entering the country.<sup>viii</sup> Segregation would start at the border, and would cover the entire country. When African American activists called out the Canadian government on this, the feds denied it. In 1911, the Minister of Immigration declared in the House of Commons, “ there are no instructions issued by the Immigration Branch of my department that will exclude any man on account of his race and colour.”<sup>ix</sup> Where the Americans had been up front about their racism, the Canadian way one hundred years ago was to be racist, but deny it. Our racism would be polite, quiet, and secret – except to those it affected.

These measures did reduce the number of Blacks who were able to enter the country. Alberta and Saskatchewan are not known for their large Black populations. But there was one way for Blacks to get into Canada that proved to be reliable. The railways. As we all know, Canada’s nationhood was made possible by the construction of railways which stretched from sea to sea. The trips were long, so they required carriages where people could sleep. Those sleeper cars were supplied by the Pullman company of America. In addition to the luxurious fittings, the Pullman company also provided the staff, who were always Black men. <sup>x</sup>



Canadian white men greatly enjoyed being waited on by Black men, many of whom had southern accents. This echo of the slave era appealed to the railways’ customers, so this arrangement became standard for decades to come. Railway companies insisted on hiring Black men to staff the sleeper cars, and managed to smuggle them in on their trains, even when Canadian immigration sought to keep Blacks out.

Hundreds of Black men a year entered the country this way, becoming the major source of immigration and employment for Canada’s Black community until the 1960s.<sup>xi</sup>

We like to think of Canada as having avoided the racist practices of the deep south. We had no formal laws declaring water fountains and restaurants that were for whites only. But the porters knew better. They travelled across the country every month. They had to find places to sleep and eat when they got off the train. They found that Canada had developed its own segregation system, but it was on the down low. Each city and town had its own informal rules about where Blacks could live or dine, but no signs were posted. Porters shared information with each other about what places were safe, and which parts of town were off limits.



To give you just one example. If a Black person wanted to see a movie in the town of New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, they had two choices. The Roseland theatre or the Academy Theatre.<sup>xii</sup> All the locals knew the rules. At one theatre, Blacks could sit on the first floor, at the other, they had to sit in the balcony. There no signs about this, everybody just knew. But if you were a black traveller, you wouldn't know, and

mistakes could be made.

In November, 1946, a black business woman from Halifax decided to take in a movie at the Roseland theatre. Her car had broken down, so she had some time to kill. You know her name, it was Viola Desmond, she is now on our ten dollar bills. She's not on our bills because she was the first Black woman in Nova Scotia to start up a beauty school. Nor is it because she owned a chain of hair salons, or that she owns a thriving business of hair products at a time when few white women run businesses of any kind.<sup>xiii</sup>

She's on our bills because of what happened at the movie theatre in New Glasgow, in 1946. She bought a ticket, and sat down on the ground floor. She had bad eyesight, so she needed to be close to the screen. But management told her as a coloured woman, she had paid to sit in the balcony. So she tried to pay for a ticket on the first floor, where whites sat. They refused. So, she sat there anyway. The management called the police, dragged out her by force, which she resisted, and she spent the night in jail.<sup>1</sup> The next morning, in court, she was fined 26 dollars because her crime was that she had not paid one extra cent in amusement tax by paying for the cheaper balcony seat. Her "crime" was over not paying one cent, which she had offered to pay, but was refused by the ticket booth.



Viola Desmond is on our ten dollar bill because she appealed the conviction. It went all the way to the supreme court of Nova Scotia. But she lost. And the judges all pretended that this was a

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<sup>1</sup> Wanda Robison, "My early memories of race, my sister Viola and my journey of self discovery," *Viola Desmond's Canada*, (Fernwood Publishing: Halifax, 2016), 78.

case about paying one cent – the majority decision made no mention of racism. Canadians don't like to admit racism. That's been going on a long time. We denied that we were blocking people at the border based on their skin colour; we denied that we initially blocked Blacks from joining the Army in World War One; and we have told ourselves that only the Americans had a segregation system. Our racism has a long history, but we have swept it under the rug, denied it, told ourselves to watch what happens south of the border because things are much better here. Denying racism **is** the Canadian form of racism.



The Black porters discovered this sort of racism everywhere they went where there were Black communities. But they didn't just grin and bear it. The porters became a sort of underground railroad for sharing information across the country. They shared news among Black communities, often hiding Black newspapers in their shoeshine kits.<sup>xiv</sup> They formed a union, and became one of major players in creating the Black wing of the

Canadian civil rights movement.

So what should we as Christians do? Today, our evil spirits are racism, sexism, homophobia, among others. What makes them evil is that they are a lie. They claim that some human beings are less than human, lacking in full humanity. It is a lie that seeks to deny what God has told us – that each of us is one of God's children, to be treated with equal respect and love. When racism denigrates the humanity of a person, it is engaging in a life-denying lie. It is anti-God, denying the sanctity of God's creation. It is a falsehood, and always wrong.

Our job as Christians is not to pretend that things are better than they are. Deception is evil's game, not ours. We are called to follow the one who is the Truth and the Life. The truth about our full potential as human beings; the life that each and every human being deserves, regardless of their appearance, sexuality or gender. As white Canadians, we have been in the sleepers' car for too long. And It is time to wake up. So that the next time we hear of a little black girl being placed in handcuffs, our reaction will not be disbelief, but recognition that an old evil spirit is still with us. And evil spirit that needs to be chased out, again and again. This is a fight God wants us to win, and with God's help, we can .Amen.

Great video on viola Desmond:

<https://humanrights.ca/story/one-womans-resistance>

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<sup>i</sup> Johnny Diaz, “6-Year-Old Held in Mental Health Center for 2 Days Without Mother’s Consent,” *New York Times*, Feb 17, 2020.

<sup>ii</sup> Desmond Cole, *The Skin We’re In*, (Doubleday Canada, 2020), 20-1.

<sup>iii</sup> Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Color Line*, (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2010), 29.

<sup>iv</sup> Sarah-Jane Mathieu, 36.

<sup>v</sup> Quoted in Sarah-Jane Mathieu, 49.

<sup>vi</sup> Sarah-Jane Mathieu, 33.

<sup>vii</sup> Sarah-Jane Mathieu, 42.

<sup>viii</sup> Sarah-Jane Mathieu, 57.

<sup>ix</sup> Sarah-Jane Mathieu, 40.

<sup>x</sup> Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Color Line*, (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2010), 11.

<sup>xi</sup> Sarah-Jane Mathieu, 58.

<sup>xii</sup> Graham Reynolds with Wanda Robson, *Viola Desmond’s Canada*, (Fernwood Publishing: Halifax, 2016), 61.

<sup>xiii</sup> Graham Reynolds with Wanda Robson, *Viola Desmond’s Canada*, (Fernwood Publishing: Halifax, 2016), 61.

<sup>xiv</sup> Mathieu, 151.