

Pilgrimage to Charleston, South Carolina

By Miriam Casey, Co-chair
Commission for Intercultural Ministries

Last November, Bob Wohlsen and I travelled to Charleston, South Carolina, to visit our son and grandson. We never anticipated that the trip would evolve into a pilgrimage to important sites in the history of Africans and African Americans in our country.

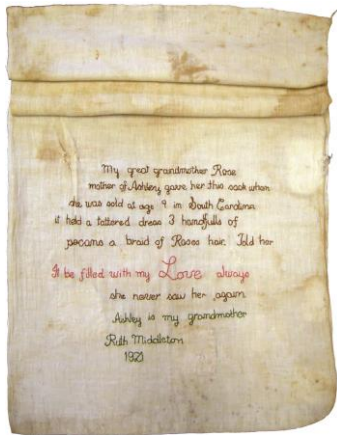
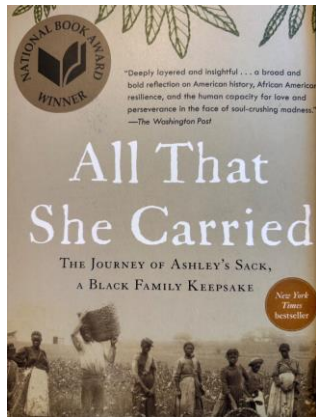
As we explored Charleston and its history, we learned that the city is filled with many churches, gaining the nickname “Holy City.” We also learned that more than 6 million Africans were brought to the Charleston port, where they were sold to be slaves in the South and beyond. The juxtaposition of the city’s grand reputation and the horrors of what actually happened there were deeply troubling to us.

During our time in Charleston, we visited the International African American Museum. The museum is located on the site where the slave ships docked and the Africans disembarked to be auctioned to the highest bidders.

*The **International African American Museum** provides an immersive experience that is challenging, illuminating, inspiring, and moves people to action. Located at the Gadsden’s Wharf where over 6 million Africans were brought to be sold as slaves, it tells “the unvarnished stories of the African American experience across generations, the trauma and triumph that gave rise to a resilient people.” (Source: <https://iaamuseum.org/about/>)*

The museum provides so much information about the African American experience—from Africa, the middle-passage, life on the plantations, till today. It shares the brutality of treatment that was experienced by the slaves and the hurtful legacy even now. But it also shares insights into progress and a hopefulness about the future.

There are stories about how African Americans during slavery and since then endured harsh treatment and thrived. One example is the story of Ashley’s sack which is displayed in the museum. A book has been written about the sack, ***All That She Carried***, by Tiya Miles. The story is multigenerational and highlights the *love, resilience, courage and perseverance* of the protagonists in the book.



(Images of the book cover, of Ashley's sack, and Miriam standing in the Stele Garden at the museum)

Across the street from our hotel stood **Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church**. The church's vision is to be "a light in the pathway of darkness." The focus is on empathy, empowerment, encouragement, equipping and igniting. We worshiped there on Sunday and sang this song together.

When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed, when you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,

Count your many blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

Refrain:

Count your blessings, name them one by one;

Count your blessings, see what God hath done;

(The African American Heritage Hymnal of Praise No. 533)

Based on the Gospel (Mark 13:1-8), the message was that when Jesus shows up in our lives, things change, there is transformation. Motivated by love for Jesus, we express praise for God and lead others to God, to ignite a fire in them.

Holding hands with others, we sang—

I pray for you.

You pray for me.

We watch things change.

Worshipping at Mother Emanuel, which has been a beacon of God's love and forgiveness (since 1817) for all the wrongs committed against the African American community, including the killing of 9 members by Dylan Roof in 2015, was the capstone for our pilgrimage.



Our pilgrimage to Charleston, South Carolina was transformative. It deepened our understanding of unimaginable cruelty toward African slaves and African Americans, and also the resilience, courage, perseverance and yes, LOVE that has enabled them to rise above these challenges. Grounded in the love of Jesus, there is forgiveness and healing.

Let's hold hands together and sing—

I pray for you.

You pray for me.

We watch things change.

Miriam Casey

Co-chair, Commission for Intercultural Ministries

Sources:

Mother Emanuel Methodist Episcopal Church, <https://motheremanuel.com/>

International African American Museum, <https://iaamuseum.org/>