

GROWING UP BLACK IN 1933

This interview was conducted by Bill Stevens
on 3/29/19 at Rev. Gil's home

What was it like to grow up black in 1933?

(Rev.Gil) I was born in 1933 amidst the segregation of the south. I was born not in a predominantly white hospital, because they were segregated, but in a black hospital in Greensboro, North Carolina. All the places were racially segregated at the time, whether it was the hospital, the neighborhood, the public schools, the parks for recreation, or the churches. And that rigidity obviously shaped my life.

When did you first sense you were being treated differently than others?

(Rev Gil) One of my memories of growing up in North Carolina, when I was about 6 or 7, was in a Five and Dime store in Winston Salem, NC with my preacher father who was making a purchase at the counter. And just as he was about to pay for his purchase, a white woman came up from the side and said in a very loud voice, "what do you mean serving niggers rather than white people?" And I remember my father just stepping back and holding my hand and waiting for her to be served. And that made a very heavy impact upon me. Not only the words, but the tone of the woman as she came up, and the way my father responded simply indicated that there was something wrong. And later I recognized the significance. My father was a graduate from College and was an honor student at the seminary. Then because he could not go to graduate schools in the south, as graduate schools were not open to blacks, he went to Syracuse University and majored in history, graduating in 1918 writing his master's paper on "Racism in the Church."

My father was born in the south and my grandfather was born in 1863 when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed. He was born on the Caldwell plan-

tation in Guilford County, NC and that was the time Caldwell became our last name. He was born into the slave environment.

Where did you go to high school?

(Rev Gil) My father was a methodist preacher and because of that he moved a lot. So we moved from Greensboro to Winston Salem and that is where I started public schools and continued to attend segregated schools in the south as we moved from North Carolina to Texas where my father was pastor of two churches and served as a campus minister. So part of my history is attending three racially segregated high schools in Texas and graduating in 1951 from the one in Austin, Texas.

And College?

(Rev Gil) I attended College in North Carolina while living with my grandfather who was born in 1863 and took care of him. I would walk to school past that Woolworth's store in Greensboro, NC which made such history because in February 1 in 1960 it was where the first strong sit-in was held. But I would walk past that store as a college student and wished that I could go in for a coke or something but I knew I could not. I finished college in 1955 but was pleased later hearing that the sit-ins took place there.

As a black college student in North Carolina, I would come north to work in Atlantic City and this was in the early 50's and I did that for two summers trying to earn money for college tuition and it was there in the 50's in Atlantic City that I worked in hotels, where I could not sleep as a guest and in restaurants, where I could not be served. That introduced me to Northern segregation, where I thought things would be different.

As I was moving towards ministry, part of my racist church history was that I was part of a student movement called the North Carolina Methodist Student Movement, which was an interracial group back in those days - very few blacks were involved. I had a wonderful time with those students and of

course certain churches would not allow us to meet because we were interracial.

What remembrances do you have of your mother growing up?

(Rev Gil) My mother was not a college graduate but was an excellent secretary and she was the person who spurred me on to challenge the segregated system. She in many ways was partially responsible for my intentionality to become one of the few blacks in a predominantly white organization in the Methodist Student Movement. I attended a Methodist Camp in NC where we who were black were separated and could not use one of the recreational swimming facilities.

But my mother was quite active in the life of the Methodist Church and pushed quite hard. That was the time the Methodist Church was racially segregated and she was active in the racially segregated component of the Church. Clearly challenging racial segregation was one of her priorities. She would attend integrated meetings of the Methodist Church somewhere in the North, but even in the North there were restaurants that were segregated where she could not eat and hotels where she could not sleep. She would come back to our house to the dining room table at supper and talk about her experiences.

One of the things that help balance me was that she talked about how often she was refused service at the segregated restaurants in the north, that southern white woman would walk out with her. She talked about how there were white persons who were clear advocate allies who stood up with her and that made a pretty important difference in my thinking as I heard her talk about not only racist whites but she also talked about the whites who were advocates of racial justice.

Where did you attend Seminary

(Rev Gil) I applied to Duke Divinity School because in 1954 the Supreme Court said that segregation was invalid in public schools and I felt that the Duke Divinity School with its Methodist relationship ought to be open to blacks, but it was not so at that time. And I got a letter from the Board of Trustees saying that they regretted that they had not changed their policy and hoped I would find a seminary that would meet my needs, and that is how I left North Carolina to go to Boston University School of Theology where I would first meet Martin Luther King.

It was in Boston University School of Theology where I first became an advocate and responded to racial segregation. While in seminary part of the training was to serve as student seminarians in churches. I had the experience in Boston of all places to have interviews with white pastors from the New England churches looking for a student assistant. And in some of those interviews I could tell that those white pastors were surprised to see a black student coming for the interview and I could tell immediately that I could not be home in that particular church.

Then I had an interview with a pastor in a church in Stoughton, MA whose name was Dale White. He was very open to my staying there and I stayed there in that church for two years as a seminarian and in the last year of the seminary training, Grace and I got married. We named our first son, Dale, after the white pastor because of my deep appreciation to him for transcending the cultural race system. I then remembered that my father and I were named after another white methodist minister, a man named Gilbert Haven, who was a white pastor in New England, who was a strong proponent of integration and racial intermarriage. Interestingly enough my father's parents named him Gilbert Haven Caldwell and my father and mother named me Gilbert Haven, junior. Both named after white persons who broke the chains of segregation.

When you look back on your life, are you happy you took the path you did?

(Rev Gil) As I look back on my life I felt I was being nudged, I was being pulled, I was being prodded, in fact it was something that I just had to do in order for life to become meaningful. I could not be the traditional, institutional church person. One of the things that kept me in the church was my involvement with the Civil Rights Movement. I can't understand any person going through life without being bothered by injustice and not in their own way resisting and challenging. That I think it is important. I sense all around me there is a resistance that I have not seen in a long time and I only just hope it is not temporary. We celebrate the greatness of our institutions by acknowledging their limitations and their flaws and therefore we keep pushing them. And I say that both about democracy and Christianity.

What do you desire most at this time of your life?

(Rev Gil) What I want more than ever for us, as Church and as a Nation, is to acknowledge, as George Santayana said, "those who do not learn from their history are doomed to repeat it." And I don't think we really remember our negative history either in Church or Society, and therefore we do not see the need to make amends, and I would say reparations. And I want to believe even though people are not conscious of it, that much of our justice work whether is racial or economic, or sexual orientation, is that we are attempting to make up for lost time, and we are attempting to be in this generation what others were not in their generation. And that is important. For so many have just accepted the culture of discrimination and that needs to be challenged. In fact we want to be the best that we can be as a democracy and as a people of faith. And my hope is that Asbury Park can be a mini model city on matters of justice. We talk about our diversity but we have to walk our talk.

What would you say to the young black people of Asbury Park and our nation?

(Rev Gil) I would want young black people to be more aware of the history of struggle. This is the 400th anniversary of the arrival of slaves in Jamestown, in what is now Virginia. It is imperative that people recognize that kind of history. As you recognize it and acknowledge the roads that people have traveled before you and the walls they have mounted and knocked down, that there has to be a seriousness in living your life today and not taking it for granted. Standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before you. And I am not sure my generation has done the job we should have done in terms of passing the baton onto the younger black people. And I am afraid that sometimes they have gotten off track and society appreciates that they have gotten off track and does not encourage them to be the best that they can be. And I hope we are working on that in Asbury park.