

Civil Rights Pilgrimage: Day 6 and 7 – Monday, June 5 and Tuesday, June 6

Our bags are packed, and we're ready to go... heading to the airport this morning.

We spent the last two days of our Civil Rights Pilgrimage in Rome, GA. After arriving here a day earlier than we planned (because of our hotel challenges in Selma) we enjoyed a slow morning. Some of us wandered down for breakfast, others enjoyed a quiet morning in our rooms. We all met up for lunch at local eatery. Only in the South, I think, could I order a BLT with Fried Green Tomatoes on it!

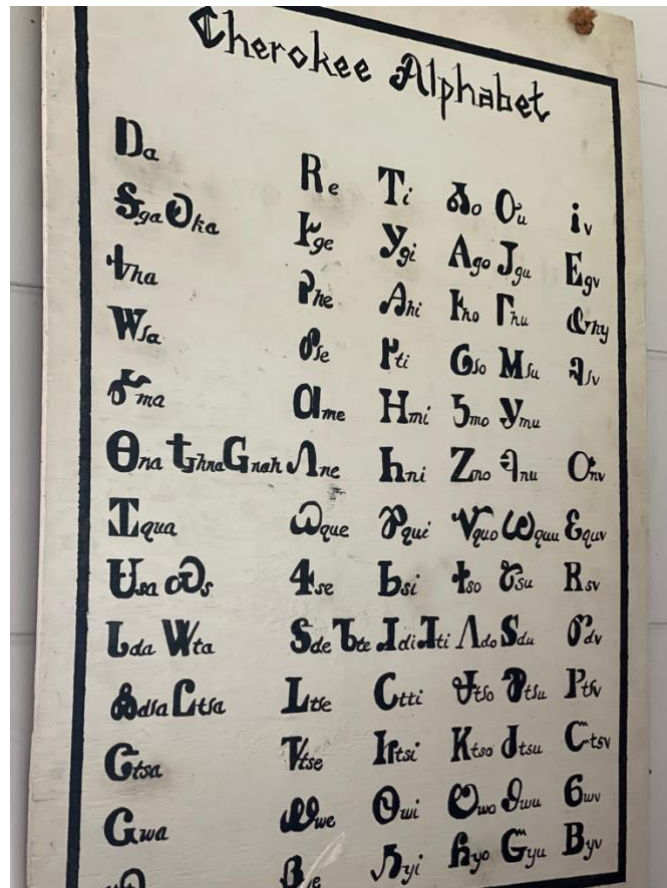
After lunch our group headed to Chickamauga & Chattanooga National Military Park, a battlefield in the Civil War known as the "Gateway to the Deep South." After the fighting, a Confederate soldier ominously wrote, "This...is the death-knell of the Confederacy." As our van meandered through the battlefield, it stopped at various markers to hear the story of this place of violence, reminding us of the many ways slavery birthed bloodshed, loss and tore at the fabric of our connection to one another.

The ease of the day continued, offering us flexibility in our schedule as we were on our own for dinner.

Day 7 of our pilgrimage expanded our lens on Civil Rights, as we learned the story of the native people of the Cherokee Nation in Georgia, and their many betrayals by the US government leading up to the Trail of Tears. We visited New Echota, a town that became the capital of the Cherokee Nation, after losing thousands of acres of land over many decades. By 1825 they had been forced from their indigenous way of life into a more agrarian economy. Hoping acculturation would help the Cherokee stay on what was left of their ancestral land, they adopted European systems including developing a written language, established a constitution, and creating an order of governance modeled on the three branches of the United States' government. In our tour of the recreated New Echota town we stepped into their Supreme Court building, their two chamber legislative hall and the printer house where they printed a newspaper in English and Cherokee. We walked inside barns and cabins built with incredible dovetail design. In less than ten years though, this exact system failed the Cherokee. When the citizens of Georgia wanted to violate the existing treaty, and claim the last remaining Cherokee land, the Cherokee appealed to the United States Supreme Court. Although the Supreme Court sided with Cherokee Nation, the President and Congress refused to comply, allowing the Georgia guard to forcibly

evict 16,000 Cherokee from their homes, sending them out on foot to Oklahoma as winter began. Four thousand Cherokee died on this forced march.

After lunch we visited the home of Major Ridge, the Cherokee leader who signed the final treaty with the United States giving away the last of their land. Ridge knew when he signed the treaty he was signing his death warrant, as his people would consider him the ultimate traitor. Six months later a group of Cherokee ambushed Ridge and assassinated him. He died believing he made the best choice available to him to keep his nation alive. Having served as a soldier during the war of 1812, Major Ridge knew the consequence of trying to fight the US military. They would decimate his people and the Cherokee nation would cease to exist.



The story of New Echota and Major Ridge reveal the tragic consequences of being “discovered” by the European colonists. Dr. Catherine Meeks chilling words from our first day came back to me: “Because our center is named after Absalom Jones we have to be committed to as much disruption as possible. We tell the best truth we can here: We are a nation committed to genocide. That’s what we do.”

I think of all the Cherokee lost, before they lost their land. They began by giving up some land, in hopes of keeping some. Major Ridge, a man nurtured on indigenous values of reciprocity with the land, mutual relationships, and matrilineal leadership, became a plantation farmer and owner of slaves like his European neighbors. Before he lost his land, he lost his soul. To be more civilized and “educated”, his nation’s rich culture of oral storytelling found itself trying to capture the breadth of their language within the limitations of written letters.

The Cherokee experienced the horror we learn again and again when we try to appease power executed through violence. We hope if we accommodate the powerful, we will be protected from their violence. But those whose power is grounded in violence will never regard others mutually. They will always use their violence to take what they want. Those who give away pieces of themselves along the way, hoping to fit in and save something precious, end up losing it anyway.

Although grateful to have learned this part of our nation's story, something felt off. I noticed the tone was different from the storytelling I experienced in Montgomery. The "Lynching Museum", the Southern Poverty Law Center Memorial to the Martyrs, the Legacy Museum, the King Center... all these storytellers were of African descent. Leaders of European descent told us the history of the Cherokee Nation. While compassionate and thoughtful - acknowledging the violence and loss experienced by the Cherokee peoples - it lacked the power of the storytelling in Montgomery. The seat we sit in matters. It shapes our perspective, and the way we share information. There is a difference between history and story. Story carries emotion, invites us into an experience, helps us to "know" and "see" from a perspective different from our own. I wondered how a descendant of the Cherokee Nation might have helped us "know" and "see" them, rather than know about them.



The horror of our nation's violence, of our genocide, weighed on me as we headed back to our hotel. I felt despair for the way it's legacy continues to haunt us centuries later. I was grateful our evening ended with a healing service at St. Peter's Episcopal.

Grateful for the power of liturgy to hold our story, to speak God's power into despair, to remind us that despite our violence, Love's power wins in the end.

“But now thus says the Lord,

he who created you,

he who formed you,

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name; you are mine.

² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

³ For I am the Lord your God,

⁴ You are precious in my sight

and honored and I love you,

⁵ Do not fear, for I am with you;”

~ Isaiah 43:1-5

Shalom,

Pastor Mary