This meditation was written by Dr. Doug Hood’s son, Nathanael Hood, a second year seminary student at Princeton Theological Seminary.

A Very Strange Town

READ: 2 Corinthians 5:17, 18

“So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived! All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation.”

REFLECT:

Earlier this month I spent a few days vacationing in St. Augustine with my family. This may seem an odd choice for a vacation, but the older I get the more I feel myself drawn towards ancient things. It doesn’t get more ancient—at least in North America—than St. Augustine. Founded in the sixteenth century by the Spanish, it’s the oldest continuously-inhabited European city in America. Walking its streets was like traveling backwards and forwards in time through different eras and cultures. Of all its magnificent sites and attractions, none captivated me quite like the Plaza de la Constitución. When it was first built as the town center by the Spanish, royal decrees mandated that it be the literal center of the community’s religious, government, and commercial functions. As such, it’s bordered by the stately Governor’s House, the nearly two-hundred-year-old Trinity Episcopal Church, and the breathtaking Cathedral Basilica of St. Augustine, home to the oldest Christian congregation in the contiguous United States. And then, in the center of the plaza, there’s a small open air pavilion. It’s easy to miss, particularly in the shadow of the churches. But none should. For this is the old slave market.

The city and people of St. Augustine don’t like to talk about the slave market. In a place where every other manhole cover seems to have a historical marker, it’s conspicuously missing one. None of the travel brochures we read mentioned it, and neither did any of our tour guides. It is, perhaps understandably, absent from the city’s official tourism website. Of all the historical sites we visited there, it was the only one I didn’t walk through. I was afraid it would scorch my feet. I remember not feeling sadness at the site of it, but anger. Not just the righteous anger one would expect at such a site, but indignant anger towards the two churches—one Catholic, one Protestant—who for centuries looked upon it without blinking. I was reminded of the story of Saint Telemachus, a fourth century monk who was martyred after literally throwing himself between two gladiators in a Roman amphitheater to stop their fighting. Every day the members of those churches didn’t do likewise and throw themselves at the slave market to destroy it, they failed in their sacred duties as Christians.

It makes one wonder how they as churches—and we as a larger nation of Americans—are supposed to move forward with the egalitarian promises and demands of our Christian faith after
so many years of racial injustice and with so much left to be done. The Apostle Paul was likewise confronted with a congregation with generations of violent racial baggage in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians. Corinth was a Greek city that over a century earlier had been sacked, destroyed, and rebuilt by the Romans. In the time of Paul, its fledgling Christian community would’ve contained Roman colonizers, Greek descendants of the conquest, and local Jews who had likewise been subjugated by Rome. Crucially, Paul doesn’t ignore the strife. Instead, he labels them “old things” that have been replaced by “new things” as part of God’s “ministry of reconciliation.” What was this reconciliation? We’re not sure. Frustratingly, the biblical narrative of the Corinthian church ends with this epistle.

But St. Augustine’s narrative—indeed, our country’s narrative—continues. I have no doubt that in the years since the end of slavery both the Basilica and Trinity Episcopal have confessed and repented of their church’s inactivity while the market was active. But that reconciliation takes more than just forgiveness, it takes rebirth. I mentioned earlier that there is no historical marker for the slave market in the Plaza. But there is one celebrating a very different moment in the city’s history: the St. Augustine movement in the 1960s when Christian Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. marched and fought there for their people’s freedom. King and his fellow “Foot Soldiers”—some black, some white—re-sanctified that Plaza with blood and bravery, and it was more powerful a witness of God’s ministry of reconciliation in this world than any church apology ever could be. So must we all struggle, together as one, towards God’s final reconciliation.

RESPOND:

1. How has this scripture or meditation spoken to you? **Pray:** “What would you have me hear, O Lord?”

2. What one specific act do you intend to take, an attitude to change, a person to see, or prayer to pray? **Pray:** “What would you have me do, O Lord?”

PRAY:

*Gracious Jesus, help us to never lose sight of our duty as Christians to fight for justice for all peoples in all places in all times. Guide us in this work of reconciliation. Amen.*