



“The Ed Johnson Story: Remembrance and Reconciliation”

Remarks by Head of School Lee Burns
Chapel, Friday, September 17, 2021

Good morning. Today I want to share with you a story about something that happened about 116 years ago here in Chattanooga; in fact, some of the events occurred here on this campus, on this very ground that you and I walk along daily. It is a sad story, but at the same time it is an uplifting one, a story that has the potential to bring us together as a community, that has the potential of bringing us closer together as McCallie Men who support and value and honor each other...and as men one day who will serve and shape our society in ways, I hope and believe, that unite us through a spirit and demonstration of respect, dignity and equality.

Before I talk about what happened 116 years ago, I want to tell you about what is happening now. This weekend, Chattanooga citizens will come together for a series of events and activities that will culminate on Sunday with the unveiling of a statue at south end of the Walnut Street Bridge downtown honoring the memory of Ed Johnson and the two lawyers who valiantly worked to save his life, and in doing so, changed the course of history. One of the events, by the way, will feature McCallie alumnus Jon Meacham '87, who will lead a panel of scholars discussing lynchings of black citizens. There are 16 different events over the weekend, and I encourage you, if you can, to attend one. I'll send you an email later this morning that lists the events.

What I want to talk about today is the McCallie School – your school – connection, and I'll give part of the story away: in this tragic event, we – McCallie – were on the right side of history.

I suspect that some of you know the Ed Johnson story by now. He was a young Black man in Chattanooga who was accused in 1906 of sexually assaulting a white woman. The woman, Nevada Taylor, could not identify or describe any physical characteristics of her attacker, except that he had a leather strap with which he choked her. The assault rightly angered the community. The sheriff offered a reward for any information leading to an arrest. A citizen, Will Hixson, likely seeking money and fame but certainly not the truth, wandered the city, apparently in an attempt to identify a potential suspect, and he randomly chose and accused Ed Johnson, an African American man in his early 20's, of the crime.

There was no evidence to prove or even suggest his guilt; in fact, there was plenty of evidence to prove him innocent. A dozen individuals testified that he was at work across town during the time of the assault. But regardless, he was arrested by a racist sheriff and quickly tried, convicted, and sentenced to death. His lawyers, Noah Parden and Styles Hutchins, appealed, taking the case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court which ordered a stay of execution. A white mob didn't like that, and on a cold Sunday afternoon in March, they marched to the jail, pulled Ed Johnson out of his cell while sheriff deputies stood by and watched, dragged him to the Walnut Street bridge and hanged him from the iron beams. While hanging from the bridge, the mob fired their pistols into him. His body fell to the bridge, and he was shot in the head.

Ed Johnson's last words were, "God bless you all. I am an innocent man." Amazing grace amidst evil, an agonizing tragedy and terrible injustice. His words echoed those of Jesus on the cross, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

There is a lot more to the Ed Johnson story. Those of you who took Mr. Wallin's or Mr. Levitt's history class in 8th grade know of those details. In fact, some of you have visited the cemetery, even cleaned it, where Ed Johnson is buried, just a few miles from here, as well as the courthouse where he was jailed and tried.

What I want to talk about today is a lesser-known part of the Ed Johnson story. McCallie School was in its first year when Ed Johnson was lynched. As I hope you know, two brothers, Park and Spencer McCallie, decided to start this special school, and they approached their father, T.H. McCallie, for advice and help. T.H. McCallie was in his 70s and was retired as minister of First Presbyterian Church. In retirement, he purchased a farm on what was then considered the outskirts of town and moved his family here to the Ridge. When his two sons approached him about opening a school, he not only offered them his farmland, he gave them his house, which no longer stands but is known as the original Founders Home for which Founders Dorm is named. He also gave them a condition and charge for the school: that it be committed to the glory of God in Christ and teach Christian principles. He was so much a part of the creation of the school, that the two brothers listed him as one of the founders.

When the Rev. McCallie heard about a mob wanting to lynch Ed Johnson, what did he do? Well, as I said, he was in his 70s, retired, and he could be expected to do nothing. But that wasn't who the Rev. McCallie was. That wasn't what McCallie was or is. He organized a group of other white clergy, and they worked hard to stop the lynching – at one point even standing in the entrance to the jailhouse to keep the mob away. He encouraged white pastors to preach sermons against racism and injustices. Some did, and some had their lives threatened or their houses burned. He took a stand for what was right.

After the trial and conviction, when Ed Johnson was being held in jail, before the mob came, the young Black attorney defending him had to travel to Washington to argue before the Supreme Court for a stay of execution. When they heard that the attorney's wife and children were left alone, some of the racists in Chattanooga sent signals that they planned to attack his family and burn his house. In response, the Rev. McCallie told the attorney that his family should come to campus, stay with the McCallie family and McCallie students, and be protected. And from what we can tell from family memories, that's what happened.

I want you to think about that the next time you walk down the quadrangle past where the original Founders Home stood. Think about that young wife and two young children finding refuge – sanctuary – on McCallie's campus, protected by strangers who were willing to take a risk and do what was right – to do what was honorable. This was during the Jim Crow days of the American South, and for a white person, any white person, much less a minister, to offer shelter in his home to a Black person – well, as strange as it sounds, that was radical...even dangerous. In that context, as you walk to the Dining Hall today, or back to your dorms, or elsewhere, I want you to reflect on what a historic, brave, honorable event took place on the very ground upon which we trod.

The Rev. McCallie was the person who suggested to his sons the motto of Man's Chief End is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. His Christian faith informed and anchored his actions, which were not popular at times. He lived those words, even at the risk of danger and scorn by his fellow citizens.

The message that the Rev. McCallie delivered in 1906, the message that Ed Johnson delivered as a noose was placed on his neck, was this: everyone should be treated with dignity. We are all each other's brothers and sisters, fellow children of a loving God. We should love one another, extending justice and compassion to everyone.

The Rev. McCallie wasn't able to stop the lynching, though he tried. The following Sunday he came out of retirement and delivered a strong sermon condemning mob rule and racism – a sermon similar to one he had delivered several years before when another man was lynched. He also got other clergy to preach on the evils of racism.

Now let's return to the present. Last year, we initiated the Moving Forward Together as Brothers effort here at McCallie. This is something we needed to do because, quite frankly, we – all of us – have sometimes failed to treat everyone at McCallie School with the full dignity we all deserve. At times in our history, and it is a proud history with mostly very high marks, we have, whether intentionally or often unintentionally, not given the fullness of the McCallie experience to everyone, have not held up the dignity of each individual. We can do better. We must do better. We are doing better.

The Bible makes clear that we are all sinners. Inevitably and without exception, we make mistakes, we fail, we fall short of our principles, of what we profess. As individuals we do this. So do our institutions. And when we fail or fall short, we are called to acknowledge it, confess it, seek forgiveness, and endeavor to do better.

To do this, we must seek and speak the truth – the truth about ourselves and our hearts, the truth about our history and our society. The truth is essential for remembering, for reconciliation, for moving forward with unity.

And while it's true that we are all mistake-prone sinners, it's also true that we are all beloved children created in the image of a loving God with inherent value and dignity.

The Bible calls us not just to understand who we are both as sinners and as forgiven children of God through Christ, and not simply to profess a certain creed and beliefs, but to live out that faith in gratitude for what God has done for us. Living that out is not easy; in fact, it's often unpopular, even costly, as we are called to sacrifice, to use our power for the powerless, to seek mercy and justice for

the oppressed, to help the poor, to love the unlovable, to wash the dirty feet of the disenfranchised, to forgive, to give our lives away. The example and teachings of Jesus was a radical reaching out to and loving people of all backgrounds, extending and offering grace, mercy and unconditional love. His love was active and intentional.

The Bible calls us not simply to be bystanders. Or comfortable. Or silent. I started reading a book Wednesday night called, “Our Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community,” by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor who returned to Germany in the early 1940’s to resist the growing influence of Adolph Hitler. Before his execution in a concentration camp in 1945, he wrote, “The sin of respectable people reveals itself in flight from responsibility.” As the mob dragged Ed Johnson from his jail cell to the bridge, hundreds of people watched. They were comfortable...and complicit in their silence.

The Ed Johnson story started well over a hundred years ago, and because of the faith in action of the Rev. T.H. McCallie, the McCallie School became part of that story. Now, thanks to the hard work and dedication of a lot of civic-minded volunteers, including a lot of McCallie alumni and friends who joined the effort to erect the Ed Johnson Memorial, the Ed Johnson story continues.

My question to you is: what role will you play in the continuing Ed Johnson story? What role will you as an individual and as a part of the brotherhood of McCallie Men play? How can we honor the dignity of every individual – regardless of the color of their skin, or their nationality, or their religious beliefs, or of their sexual orientation? What can you do in your daily lives to let everyone know that you honor them for who they are and that you will work each day to promote brotherly unity with everyone and resist the hate of division? What will you do not just on this campus within our community, but how will you also make a positive difference in the world beyond 500 Dodds Avenue?

We released a podcast earlier this week about the Ed Johnson story and McCallie’s role in it. It is pretty powerful. It is on our website, and I hope you have the opportunity to listen to it. In it, Mr. Wallin made some poignant comments. Here’s one thing he said:

“I have a fundamental belief that if we tell our students the truth and teach them to seek it honestly and to seek it all the way, through the easy parts, through the difficult parts, through all of it, that they will go out and live honorable lives, not the kind where we’re sitting on a couch and not doing anything, but the kind of honorable lives where they see the problems around them and they say how do I become part of the solution.”

Honor, Truth. Duty.

How do we honor the life and legacy of Ed Johnson? How do we seek and speak the truth? How do we live out the duties we have to each other?

We don’t have lynchings anymore. It’s common for some people in our society to say that was a long time ago, or I didn’t do it, so let it go. But as Willian Faulkner famously said, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” Our histories, as individuals and a society, continue to shape us, in both straightforward and subtle ways. We need to know and own our history, and be sensitive to the ways that our words and actions, even one word, can demean, dehumanize, and dismiss. They can cut at

another's dignity and worth. What we as a McCallie brotherhood must focus on this year, and in years to come, is identifying and being mindful of those cuts...and then stopping them. Stopping ourselves from saying or making them, and stopping our friends from saying or making them. And I think we can do more. When we see our brothers being cut, let's find ways to heal those wounds, let's find ways to stop the pain. When someone purposely or carelessly diminishes the dignity of someone else because they are seen as different or for any reason, let's not just stand by and do nothing. Let's stand in the jailhouse door and say "No, not on my watch."

And more than stopping the cuts, let's intentionally build bridges. Seek out connections and relationships with fellow students who are very different from you. Let's listen well to each other's stories and heritage. Let's be tender with the scars that we all have. Let's celebrate the different strengths that we all bring.

The Ed Johnson story continues. You sitting here today will speak and write the next chapter of the story.

