

**Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, June 21, 2020**

“The Cedarbrook Swim and Tennis Club”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Christian Scripture: Matthew 10:24-39



Most of us have ‘happy places’. These happy places are most often associated with childhood memories. We remember these places with great nostalgia. We often idealize them.

My grandparents, Dean and Daphene, loved me a great deal. My grandmother would always cut fresh fruit and put it on my cereal. I felt like a little prince. My grandfather would always give me a quarter or a dollar in the store, and in his own little coy way pretend he didn’t.



It makes a great deal of sense that my 'happy place' was the Cedarbrook Swim and Tennis Club in Kennington, Maryland, a relatively affluent suburb of Washington, D.C., next to Bethesda. Oh, as a kid I loved to go there! Yes, I enjoyed swimming and picnicking. And, Oh! During the evenings on holidays, the swim club would present huge elaborate, I'd call them, 'aquatic pageants' and musicals, complete with lightshows, surround-sound music, costumes, and synchronized swimming. The place was just magical.



I loved this community pool most because my grandfather had the keys to the whole place. You see, my grandfather was one of the founders of the club and its chairman for years, if not decades. So, he had the keys to the club

house, the pump room, the shed where the lawnmowers were kept, and 'the loft' (in a A-frame type house) where all of the club's trophies were on display and historical photos hung on the walls.

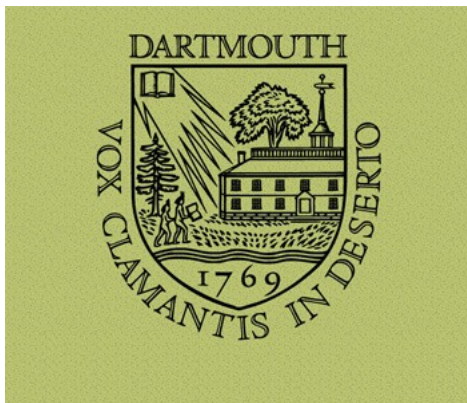


The history and memorabilia proudly on display dated back to July 4, 1955, when the club first opened (see opening day in the image above). No matter how many times I went to 'the loft', I would search the photos to find my father when he was my age. Throughout the years, he was on the swim team and was often the captain. I could see my father grow-up as I panned the across the years. And I'd see my aunt in pictures, giggling with all her girlfriends. I would see images of my grandfather, Dean. I used to always marvel that he once had hair! The Cedarbrook Swim and Tennis Club was a place for family, fun, summer holidays, community cookouts, and celebrations of all sorts. The Cedarbrook Swim and Tennis Club was my childhood 'happy place'.



My grandfather served this club into his nineties! In the early 2000s, one day he went to the pool early as he usually did when it was still cool. He cut the club's lawn, yes, still in his 90s because he didn't think anyone else knew how to operate the lawnmower properly. You see, you have to push the choke a certain way. After he cut the lawn, he had a swim in one of the lanes as still too early for anyone else to be there. He often swam a slow rhythmic backstroke. That same day, he went home. He felt a little tired. He lied down for a nap, and died quietly. He loved that club.

One year, my feelings about the Cedarbrook Pool and Tennis Club changed. The story was told to be my own father before he died. And the story has always haunted me.



Like his father, Dean, before him, my father attended Dartmouth College. Dartmouth College, like many other Ivy League schools, had a long history of elitism, sexism, and racism. My father attended in the mid-1960s, graduating in 1968. As you know college campuses at that time were a hot-bed of political activism, even elitist, sexist, and racist schools like Dartmouth College hosted Malcom X and became 'woke' in their own 1960s way. Campuses protested everything from the Vietnam War to Apartheid in South Africa. My father was a part of all that. My father was Dartmouth College's mascot, the Dartmouth Indian. In-part because he began to oppose an Indian caricature being the mascot, he was the *last* Dartmouth Indian.



My father told me he once came home from college for the summer and noticed for the first time that there were no Blacks at the pool, ever. You see, Maryland, though a mid-Atlantic state, was still the south, and in the 1960s, was segregationist.¹ Therefore, by default, during the 1960s, the Cedarbrook

¹ Maryland only outlawed slavery in 1864. The Maryland legislatures refused to ratify the 14th and 15th amendments. Only in 1967 did Maryland repeal a law criminalizing sex and marriage between Whites and Blacks.

Swim and Tennis Club was racist and did not allow Blacks to swim or play tennis there.²



My father confronted my grandfather who was at the time chairman of the pool's Board of Directors. My father challenged my grandfather, accused him, and declared him complicit. My grandfather, no doubt, was a 'good man'. Nonetheless, my grandfather feared making the move to allow Blacks to swim at the Cedarbrook Swim and Tennis Club as it would tear the club apart. It would cause a crisis for the leadership. To allow Blacks would attract huge pressure against the pool. People would cancel their memberships.



People would not pay their dues. My grandfather would surely be deposed as chairman if he advocated that Blacks use the change rooms with Whites.

² Although, I do not know if the club's policy was *de facto* or *de jure*.

Families would be divided. It would result in division. It would be chaos. The club would receive horrible press in the media. It would be a disaster. What my grandfather founded, dearly loved, nurtured, and led would be rent asunder. He could not bear it.

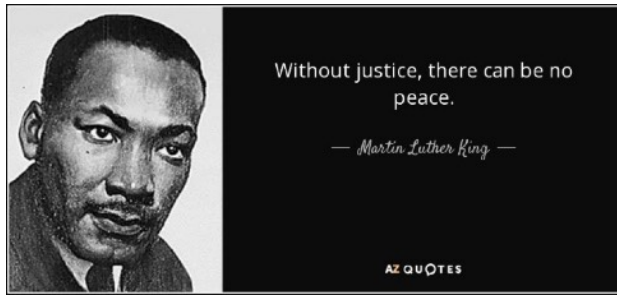
As my father told it, he boycotted the pool and refused to compete in the club's swim team. As my father told it, he did not speak to his father most of the summer. My grandfather's happy home was full of tension, mistrust, anger, and fighting. I can only imagine my grandmother's grief at a good father and a good son refusing to eat or speak to one another.



Today, we celebrate Father's Day. If alive today, my father would celebrate his father. I celebrate my father. My son celebrates me, his father. This is all well and good. In fact, in the Hebrew scriptures, the Torah teaches as one of the Ten Commandments that we ought to honor our father and mother (Exodus 20:12).

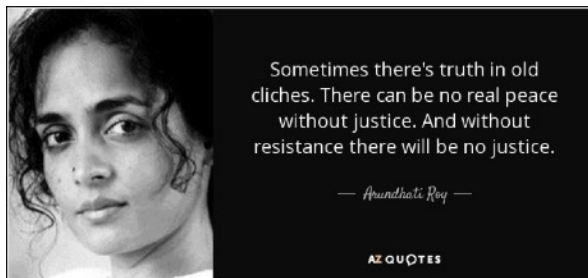
Yet, in the Christian scriptures Jesus said he has not come to bring peace, but a sword (Matthew 10:34)! Jesus says that he has come to divide mother against daughter and son against father (Luke 12:53).

How can we reconcile this Father's Day with Jesus' teaching in Matthew?



I would say first, that there is no peace without justice. In the midst of injustice, many may plea for peace. Yet, what they are often advocating is the continued oppression of others *without* opposition. The absence of violence is not peace as long as there as injustice.

Jesus' ministry, like those of prophets before him, was first and foremost about the establishment of justice *before* peace and love. Because there is no peace and love without justice.



Those who have power and influence rarely, if ever, forfeit that power and influence voluntarily. It always requires tension, truth-telling, conflict, division, and much, much angst. History makes clear that a great deal of contestation is often required to establish justice. Only after justice is achieved can true peace be declared. And this is the peace that God, through Jesus the Christ, wills.

As we struggle with the great eruption that is occurring in our country, I want you to remember that good people like my grandfather, Dean, can be on

the wrong side of history. I want you to remember that those good people, like my father, who cause conflict and division in the struggle for justice are doing God's will. I want you to be assured that in the end, my father and grandfather reconciled.



And I want you to be assured that today, my Black daughter, Madeline, can swim at the Cedarbrook Pool and Tennis Club. May God's will on Earth be done, just as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".