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Across the Tracks

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"...and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters." Book of Revelation 1:13-15 NRSV

As we walked down the sidewalk toward the sound of marching bands, I noticed the sign across the street: JESUS IS BLACK.

We came to Durham for the Duke football game. It was a beautiful day, and the game was at night, so we had time to wander. Just south of historic downtown Durham, past old brick cigarette factories that are now trendy lofts and hip restaurants, we literally crossed the railroad tracks. Everything changed.

Down Fayetteville Street, the houses were small with chain-link fences. Instead of boutiques in old tobacco warehouses, there were vape shops in rundown commercial strips and abandoned grocery stores. One house was now a restaurant, Afrikikos Bistro, promising a taste of Africa. Elsewhere on the street residents were selling parking spaces on their front lawns and firing up large grills made from oil drums. The ribs were already smoking. Sidewalk vendors sold bright Kente cloth garments.

We heard about the Homecoming parade at the nearby college, North Carolina Central University, a historically Black university (HBCU) and headed there. It is Durham's "other school," only three miles from Duke University but a world apart.

Later we would wander the well-tended botanical gardens at Duke. We would walk through the gorgeous campus, a little bit of Oxford in an old southern mill town. And on Sunday we would listen to an edifying sermon while staring in awe at the stained glass and soaring Gothic ceiling of the Duke Chapel. But on Saturday morning, we were not at Duke; we were in an unfamiliar and not entirely comfortable world.

As the parade wound down, we called for a ride to return to our hotel. Waiting for our ride, I saw the "Jesus is Black" sign again. It was attached to the side of a folding table, along with a few posters. Two young men were standing in front of their make-shift booth. I crossed the street and smiled.

I looked at the posters. One was a weather-beaten collage of gruesome photos with the title *Lynchings*; the other was a vaguely familiar painting of Jesus, under the title of Cesare Borgia. When I turned to the men, it was clear that I was not part of their target audience. Despite the scowls on their faces, I asked them who was represented in the portrait. They didn't answer. Instead, one pointed at the picture and asked me who this was.

"Jesus," I replied, guessing this might be a trick question.

I was wrong. I learned something new. This was a painting of Cesare Borgia, an Italian cardinal and political manipulator during the Renaissance. According to legend, Borgia was the model for Machiavelli's *The Prince*, the prototype of the wily leader. He was also the model for this celebrated Jesus

painting by Leonardo da Vinci, who may or may not have been the lover of Cesare Borgia.

The two men gave me a short lesson in art history. Since the time of Jesus and his death and resurrection, artists struggled with how to portray Jesus. In the Middle Ages, painting was more figurative, so pictures of Jesus were flat and two-dimensional, much like the icons we still see. The details of the face were not important because what was important was the glow surrounding the figure, the clear indication of Jesus's divinity.

In the Renaissance, with the development of more "realistic" painting, Jesus started to look like a real human and was always a White man. And that was the issue for my new friends. If you were a Black child growing up with a White Jesus, what kind of message did that send?

I asked about the Biblical basis for their views, and they quickly told me it was all in the first chapter of the Book of Revelation. Jesus had feet of brass. He had passed through trial by fire. They asked me what color a penny coming out of a furnace would be. "Black," they answered their own question, "just like the color of Jesus when he emerged from the fire."

I saw my ride arrive on the other side of the street. It was time to go to my football game. I thanked my new friends and offered them encouragement for their work. We shook hands. They smiled.

Later, at the hotel, I googled Cesare Borgia and the first chapter of the Book of Revelation. The Internet has chatter about Borgia and Leonardo. The evidence for all this is not clear. I read the first chapter of the Book of Revelation. That was even less clear.

I am almost illiterate in art history and the Book of Revelation is very tough reading for my cut and dried mind. Was this man with white hair and glowing brass feet a Black man? Does it matter?

I simply do not know. I know it mattered to them, and I do know two other things: first, they were sincere men, and second, I have not lived their lives.

I also know that sometimes you must cross the tracks and cross the street.
You need to smile, hold out your hand, open your heart, and listen for the
Word of the Lord.