

The Long Road

15 January 2006

(Martin Luther King's Birthday observance)

Bible passage: **Colossians 1:11** (*The Message*)

We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth, but the glory-strength that God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy.

Sermon nugget: That which is right and just takes time and patience. There are no shortcuts to the right thing.

Thursday, December 1, 1955, began like most other days in Montgomery, Alabama, but it certainly didn't end that way. On that day, a single individual, in one inspiring act of bravery, started one of the great freedom movements of the modern era. Rosa Louise Parks, an African-American woman and seamstress by trade, and a regular bus rider in that city, refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white rider. Coretta Scott King, widow of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote that her "courageous act of principled nonviolence ignited the American civil rights movement."

She and those who had gone before her had suffered centuries of discrimination, and they were yearning for human dignity. Her action resulted in her arrest, but others took up the cause, and the black community in Montgomery orchestrated a boycott that lasted 381 days. It ended on December 20, 1956, with a Supreme Court ruling that Alabama's state and local laws requiring segregation on buses were illegal.

In the wake of Rosa Parks' death last November, we have learned more about her. For instance, I had not known that she was involved in the NAACP, and was well known in her community. I read that buses would often pass her by at a bus stop rather than stop to pick her up, because they didn't really know what she might do. They thought that she might be trouble for them.

The discrimination she had experienced, the struggle she had been through—everything that had been a part of her life up until that time served to prepare her for the moment when she refused to give up her seat. The Lexington, Kentucky *Herald Leader*, on the occasion of her recent death, wrote that her years of activism and dutiful organizing readied her for that historic moment. The tribute continued, "Her indelible mark on history comes from the kind of courage that enables a person to dedicate a lifetime of days to working—against the odds with little pay or glory—for what she knows is right." It took a lifetime of working day after day in order to make that first little dent in the long history of prejudice and discrimination.

And then it took many more years and the actions of many others before civil rights became the law of the land. It took an unlikely leader like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in partnership with a President from Texas, Lyndon Johnson, to bring about the passage of the Civil Rights bill in 1964.

But even the passage of that bill did not bring about equality and freedom from discrimination. Voting rights for all citizens was not a part of it, so the struggle was not yet over. It took a long time and a great toll of life, but King stuck to it. He and others alongside him stayed the course and pursued what they believed to be right and just.

Certainly the gains that have been made didn't happen overnight, and we kid ourselves if we believe that there is no racial discrimination in this country today. Prejudice still exists in one form or another, but we want to honor people like Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks who stayed the course. Because of their commitment to doing what was right, I believe that we are moving in the right direction.

We salute both of them today, and we honor them because they are good examples of what our Bible passage is talking about. It reads like this: **We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth, but the glory-strength that God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy.**

Both King and Parks lived what that passage is about. It takes great spiritual strength to stick it out over the long haul, in the face of arrest, abuse, bombing, death, but that is the only way things are made right. Any of us have to endure that which comes in order to bring about an end that is right and just. It's often a very long road, and one can become easily discouraged, but bringing about what God wants on this earth requires it. Certainly both Parks and King showed us what that was like during a very difficult time in our history.

I think it's important for us to realize that the long road has not yet ended. As long as there is a discrepancy in pay between white folks and black folks, prejudice exists. And frankly, all prejudice is not around the race issue, although that may be what we tend to think. There is gender bias, and age bias; there is discrimination against gays and lesbians; those who come here from other countries often experience discrimination in our schools and workplaces. Just look at our health care system if we want to see the difference in treatment that occurs between the haves and the have-nots. No, unfortunately, discrimination is alive and well in our community and in our world.

We're dead wrong if we think it all ends when laws and ordinances are passed. Those things might say what's legal and illegal, but the bigger struggle, the longer road to walk, is that within each of our hearts. I don't exactly know what it is, but it seems to me that many of us have a desire deep inside us to think that we're just a little bit better than

another person, and I suspect that each of us has to wrestle with that internally.

Now, like many of you, I like to think of myself as a person without prejudice, but if I'm brutally honest, I have to admit that there are moments when I'm simply not. Having said that, I also have to say that I hope that we all try our best to be open and accepting of all persons, whoever they may be.

However, I wonder how many of us are willing to walk the long road to eradicate any kind of bias toward our brothers and sisters at home and abroad. What are we doing to make sure that right prevails and justice becomes a reality?

Those of you who've been around The Garden for a while have probably figured out that I'm not a political activist. I don't recall ever writing a letter to a senator or congressional representative, nor have I ever written a letter to the editor. I've never marched in a protest, or put bumper stickers on my car claiming one belief or another. That's not who I am.

However, I have to say that I am grateful for those who do speak out against prejudice of any kind. For instance, I'm grateful that Kent Millard, senior pastor at St. Luke's UMC, was willing to march in Selma, Alabama, during the turbulent early days of civil rights. And I'm equally grateful that he was willing to go before the City-County Council to protest any form of discrimination against gays and lesbians. While I agree with his stance, that's not something I've very prone to do.

I'm grateful for those who demonstrated loving ways to respond to those who have often been marginalized in our world. Take, for instance, the story about one baseball players during the 30's and 40's. Hank Greenberg was his name, and he was one of the greatest players of his day. In fact, he was elected into the Baseball Hall of Fame with an 85% vote—that's how highly he was regarded.

Greenberg played his entire career with the Detroit Tigers. However, in 1946, it became clear that his skill level was declining a bit. At the end of the season, in some maneuvering that I don't quite understand, Greenberg was put on waivers by the Tigers. The only team that picked him up was the Pittsburgh Pirates, a team that was at the bottom of the league in the standing. How degrading that must have felt for Greenberg!

The year was 1947, and that was the year that Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier and became the first black person to play major league baseball. He played with the Brooklyn Dodgers, and everywhere he went with the team, he was subjected to heckling and abuse from the fans, and even from some of the players. Greenberg understood what Robinson was going through, because Greenberg was Jewish, and he had withstood his share of attacks early in his career before gaining the respect of teammates and fans. He understood.

In the early spring of 1947, Brooklyn and Robinson came to Pittsburgh to play for the first time, and Greenberg and Robinson came in contact with one another—literally. Greenberg played first base, and Robinson got there, and then was trying to steal second. He had to run back to first, and slid hard into Greenberg. Everyone waited to see what would happen, if a fight would break out, what kind of aggressive and abusive behavior might follow. None of that happened, Greenberg leaned over, gave Robinson a hand, and helped him up.

The next time Robinson got to first base, Greenberg struck up a conversation, asking him if he had been hurt on the previous play, telling him to ignore the razzing, and inviting him to dinner that evening. There were so many ways Greenberg could have responded that would have heightened the climate of hatred and prejudice, but he didn't. He extended a hand as one human being to another. He reached across what had been a barrier to form a connection.

The question—for me, and maybe for you, is “What *am* I willing to do?” How do we reach across the barriers that so often seem to divide us? How do I, how do you, begin to walk the long road of standing up for what is right and just? How do we do our part to wipe out any form of prejudice in our society?

I think it begins with examining our own lives, and then prayerfully asking God to come into our hearts and minds and spirits in such a way that any hatred, any reluctance to understand, any lack of caring, any sense of belittling another—anything that smacks of prejudice might be dissolved. We can ask God to fill our hearts with deep, unconditional love for every other human being, and every part of creation, and then we can ask God for the courage to walk the long road, hand-in-hand with our brothers and sisters everywhere. If we can do that, I'm convinced that God will make it so.

Closing:

Closing part 1

As we leave here today, I hope and pray that each of us, in our own way, is willing to walk that long road toward making what is right and just a reality.

VIDEO: Something the Lord Made

Closing part 2

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.