

"When Jesus Passes By"  
Luke 18:35-43  
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The protest marches going on all over this country once again remind us how the struggle for human dignity and equal rights is never-ending. As we learned in the war against England in our fight for independence and again over the issue of slavery during the Civil War, no one is ever going to HAND you your freedoms- they must ALWAYS be fought for. Well this morning, we are going to investigate one of the EARLIEST civil rights cases on record and how the fortunes of one small "non-person" who refused to shut up and go to the back of the CROWD shared a lot in common with ANOTHER "non-person"- a small black woman who refused to politely go and sit in the back of a BUS many years LATER. Here in Luke, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for Passover and when he does arrive, he will enter the city on a young ass. During the course of his journey, he travels through Jericho where he is about to encounter a poor blind beggar named Bartimaeus. Now next to leprosy, blindness was among the cruelest of disabilities in the ancient world. Blind persons usually occupied the lowest rung on the social ladder where they were forced to earn a living the only way they COULD- by begging. Furthermore, the blind were often relegated to the same place all beggars were- to the outskirts of the city where in order to survive, they are forced to plead for whatever scraps of kindness people might toss their way.

According to our text, although he can't SEE anything, Bartimaeus can still HEAR as he is alerted to a great commotion off in the distance. When he asks what is happening, he's told that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. Now we don't know whether he had heard of Jesus or not but we DO know that his reputation had grown far and wide over the previous three and a half years. He was regarded as a prophet of sorts, a wise teacher full of compassion of whom it was said could even perform miracles. When Bartimaeus hears that such a man is entering the town, he does what only a blind beggar CAN do, he begs for any speck of pity this Jesus might have for him. So with a loud voice, he hollers "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"

But because Bartimaeus is largely considered a person of no consequence, he is shoved into the back of the crowd by those much LARGER and more POWERFUL than himself. It seems the ONLY way he will ever reach Jesus is with the only thing he DOES possess- his VOICE. However, when he cries out, those in front who block his way start to protest. They tell him to quit making a spectacle of himself and insist that he SHUT UP. They order him to get behind everyone else and remain there in the back of the pack where he can't be seen and DEFINITELY can't be heard.

What those who seek to obstruct him don't realize is that they suffer from their OWN form of blindness by failing to recognize it is for persons such as Bartimaeus that Jesus has come in the FIRST place. Rather than giving in to the demands of the crowd and quietly retreating to the rear, this blind beggar REFUSES to shut up and instead cries out even LOUDER, "Jesus, Son of David, PLEASE have mercy on me!" It seems the more they try to muzzle him, the LOUDER

he gets and the only question is whether amid all the noise and confusion Jesus can hear him?

As the procession is about to enter the town, Jesus suddenly stops, sensing something nobody ELSE seems able to. Inquiring as to who it is that is calling his name, his disciples haven't a clue because EVERYONE seems to be calling out to him, EVERYONE is competing for his attention. But Jesus doesn't hear all the others- he only hears this one solitary voice. Commanding this caller to be brought to him, his disciples reluctantly and with great difficulty finally locate the man. "What do you want me to do for you?" asks Jesus. It seems that for the first time in his life, someone has addressed Bartimaeus as a human being, as a whole person deserving of dignity and respect. "Lord," he says, "please help me to see." It is interesting that Bartimaeus no longer addresses the good rabbi as "Jesus, son of David" but now he calls him "LORD!" Jesus's response is, "Receive your sight; your faith has made you well." We're told that in that instant, this poor blind beggar was healed and could now see. However, more important than receiving his sight, Jesus had made him a PERSON, a HUMAN BEING once again- the MOST IMPORTANT kind of cure ANYONE can receive!

Of course, this story is about so much more than a blind beggar receiving his sight- it serves as a parable about US. It shows us how although we may be able to see with our own two eyes, we can STILL be blind in our heart and in our spirit, oblivious to what is right and true and good. The loss of such sight is the WORST sort of blindness one can have- a condition that afflicts us when we CHOOSE to remain ignorant for reasons of fear or moral complacency.

In the past two weeks, America has been tested in a way she hasn't since the racial uprisings of the late 60's when the Watts section of Los Angeles, Detroit and Newark, New Jersey among others erupted in turmoil. As a young teenager growing up only a few short miles from Newark, I can still remember all-too vividly the riots that took place during that "long hot summer of '67." On July 12<sup>th</sup>, a black man named John Smith steered his taxi around a double-parked police car in Newark's Central Ward. The cops, who were white, took offence at Smith's maneuver. They stopped him, pulled him from his cab, and beat him mercilessly. Then they took him to the Fourth Precinct and beat him some more. Newark, which since the end of World War II had become a predominately black city, remained tightly controlled by a powerful political machine that was all white. The police force was ALSO overwhelmingly white and brutality was the norm. Facing constant discrimination in both jobs and housing which made their lives more likely to fall into a cycle of poverty, a change was due. Smith's beating was the spark which over the course of four days of rioting, looting, and property destruction, left 26 dead and hundreds more injured.

Now let's leap forward some fifty-three years where we find a similar scenario developing. The death of George Floyd who died while handcuffed and complaining he was unable to breathe at the hands of white police officers has unleashed a lot of frustration and pent up emotion throughout our nation and even the WORLD. It comes on the heels of the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, a 25-year-old black man from Georgia who while out for a mid-day jog was killed by a pair of father-son vigilantes, and Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old emergency medical technician, who took eight bullets from Louisville police when in the middle of the night and without warning or identifying themselves they stormed her apartment mistaking her for a drug dealer. In the face of these and OTHER deaths at the hands of law enforcement, the hue and cry

for justice and an end to racism in all its forms has been raised with persons both black and white, male and female, young and old, rich and poor standing shoulder-to-shoulder to demand how “enough is enough!” On the whole, the marchers have remained orderly and peaceful although sporadic incidents of rioting, looting and mindless destruction have been reported.

To better understand the passions triggered by Floyd’s death, let me provide some historical context. It’s been two years now since Edgar Ray Killen passed away at the age of 92, an inmate at the Mississippi State Penitentiary. In 2005, Killen, a racial segregationist AND PART-TIME PREACHER, was convicted of manslaughter for masterminding the 1964 slayings of civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman- one of the most shameful atrocities of the Civil Rights era. Known by most as Preacher Killen, his conviction came forty-one years to the day after the three were stopped and killed by Ku Klux Klansmen for doing nothing more than helping to register black voters in the state. Three years later--in 1967--Killen was acquitted by an all-white jury for their murders when one of the jurors refused to convict him, saying she could not believe “a man of God” would EVER do such a thing. Of course, the irony was that the same man who on SUNDAY mornings ascended a Christian pulpit to proclaim the wondrous love of Jesus could on MONDAY night plot the murders of three innocent young men. In other words, one may think of oneself as a good Christian and EVEN SERVE AS A MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL and yet be every bit as blind and lost as to what is right and true and good as the religious leaders of Jesus’s OWN DAY were.

Not long ago, I visited the newest addition to the Capitol Mall in Washington, D.C.- the National Museum of African American History and Culture. The highlight for me was when I found myself in a slow-moving line which went in one door and out another. To preserve the solemnity of the exhibit inside, there was a sign indicating that all persons were to maintain silence and that picture-taking was expressly prohibited. A guard was stationed at the door to make sure the line proceeded in a continuous and orderly fashion. As we entered the room single file, on display was the only object in it- an old and empty deteriorated coffin. It turned out to be the original coffin that a 14-year-old boy had once been laid to rest in- the casket which Emmett Till had occupied for half a century until he was exhumed in 2005 and given a new one.

Emmett Till was a young teenager who in the summer of 1955 traveled from his hometown of Chicago to Mississippi to visit relatives. One afternoon, it was alleged he made the innocent mistake of whistling at a white woman in a small country convenience store. That simple mistake would end up costing him his life. In the dead of night, two white men dragged him from his bed, beat him senseless, shot him through the head, and then threw his weighted body into the Tallahatchie River. Now the story might have ended there like so many other lynchings in the South had it not been for the extraordinary decision made by MAMIE TILL, Emmett's mother. At the urging of civil rights leaders, Mrs. Till decided to leave the casket open at her son's funeral. She told the mortician not to "fix" her son's face, or at least what was left of it. "I want the WHOLE WORLD to see what those men did to my little boy!" she cried.

For four long days, tens of thousands of people viewed Emmett Till's body as it lay on display in a church on Chicago's South Side. Gruesome photos of his maimed and distorted face flooded the national and international press. For the first time, America was shocked out of her comfortable complacency over the treatment of Afro-Americans in this country. People now

knew that if change was EVER going to come, they would have to put THEMSELVES on the line. Till's murder was a catalyst that gave ordinary black people not just COURAGE but instilled within them a sense of ANGER- ANGER at white supremacy and ANGER at a justice system they were denied time and time again and which would later exonerate the two men who had committed the deed even though they bragged about it afterward in an interview for LOOK magazine. That anger would shortly be transformed into a stirring social crusade we now know as the Civil Rights Movement. But it all began with the courageous act of a grieving mother who refused to be quieted, one who in the interest of justice raised the ONLY thing she had at her disposal- her God-given VOICE.

In 1962, Fanny Lou Hamer, the youngest of twenty children born to sharecropper parents, tried to register to vote in Mississippi. At that time, the threat of organized racist violence along with unfair literacy requirements made voting IMPOSSIBLE for most blacks in that state. Three times she attempted to register and each time she was denied until one day, she finally succeeded. A few months later, she was arrested for being an "agitator" and brutally beaten by two black prison inmates on orders from white police officers. The painful effects of that severe beating never left her. The Justice Department later filed charges against the officials but the men were acquitted by an all-white jury.

Two years later, in 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was organized in that state as an alternative to the regular Democratic party which then excluded blacks. Although the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party got more votes than the REGULAR Democratic party, they were refused seating privileges at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Hamer spoke on behalf of the Freedom delegation and described her beating before the entire convention, asking, "Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we are threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings?" When the Democratic Party offered to seat only TWO of her party's delegates, Hamer said, "We didn't come all this way for no two seats when all of us is tired." If the challengers were not seated, she told a national television audience, "I question America." President Lyndon Johnson refused to support the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party because he was afraid of losing white southern support and so the delegation was not seated. However, Fannie Lou Hamer's VOICE had earned her support from all over the nation and was largely responsible for the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965--the most important piece of civil rights legislation in more than half a century--making it illegal to deny ANY U.S. citizen the right to vote.

Two years ago, Pope Francis led a Palm Sunday Mass in Saint Peter's Square where many in attendance were young people on hand for the Catholic Church's "World Day of Youth." The 81-year-old pontiff spoke one day after hundreds of thousands of young Americans and their supporters all across the United States had used THEIR voice to demand tighter gun laws, many of whom were survivors of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School massacre where 17 students were killed. The Pope urged the young people in the crowd not to let themselves be manipulated. "The temptation to silence young people has always existed," he said. "There are many ways to silence young people and make them invisible. Many ways to anesthetize them, to make them keep quiet, ask nothing, question nothing. There are many ways to sedate them, to keep them from getting involved, to make their dreams flat and dreary, petty

and plaintive. Dear young people, you have it in you to shout. It is up to you not to keep quiet. Even if others keep quiet, if we older people and leaders--some corrupt--keep quiet, if the whole world keeps quiet and loses its joy, I ask you: Will YOU cry out?" In response, the young people in the crowd shouted a resounding, "YES!"

Well the question each of US must answer this morning is do WE remain silent or do we use OUR voice and move OUR feet when we witness instances of injustice- not just when it is directed towards US but towards our black and brown brothers and sisters AS WELL. As Dr. King once said, "The ULTIMATE tragedy is NOT the oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the GOOD people!" Are we willing to align our voice with that of a poor blind beggar and many OTHERS throughout history who when Jesus was passing by REFUSED to be kept down, REFUSED to keep quiet, REFUSED to have their identity and dignity stripped from them. You'll have to excuse me if I seem a bit passionate about this but I served inner-city black churches for over a decade--including one where the organist and myself were the only two whites--and I saw FIRST-HAND the prejudice and the discrimination they experienced day after day. Those parishioners taught me something which their history and their faith had taught THEM. They said, "Pastor Dave, we refuse to let ANYONE ever tell us that we're worthless and no good, to TELL us to sit down and shut up, to ORDER us to be quiet and to know our place for bigger and stronger and richer and more powerful people have been saying that to smaller and weaker and poorer people far too long. We won't EVER be afraid to STAND UP AND SPEAK OUT AND CLAIM THAT WHICH IS RIGHTFULLY OURS! We want our voices to be HEARD, Pastor, because we're confident that GOD AND JUSTICE is on our side!"

Well that's precisely what we learn from our scripture text this morning, that Christ and justice is ALWAYS on our side, that NO ONE ever has to remain poor or powerless, blind or forgotten so long as JESUS is passing by. For every African-American who's ever been racially profiled or denied housing or a job simply due to the color of his or her skin; for all those women who are told their place is in the home or are repeatedly denied advancement at their jobs because a glass ceiling is in place, or who are used and abused as sexual objects by more powerful men; for all those who suffer from disabilities which compel people to point and stare wherever they go; for all those who may be gay or lesbian and have been told they're terrible sinners for simply loving another person of the same sex, believe me when I say that they have an advocate in Jesus Christ. For in spite of all the barriers and interference others may throw up, they STILL have a voice, and if they muster the courage to call out to him as he passes by--and passing by he IS every moment of every day--then they can be assured that their voice WILL be heard with the result that they will be marginalized and forgotten NO LONGER. Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, you have called us to be united in our Lord, no longer Jew nor Greek, no longer slave nor free, no longer male nor female. Yet we indulge ourselves in retreating to safe cloisters of people just like us. God, have mercy on us. Shake us loose from our complacency, from our disregard for those who suffer. May the Spirit of the Lord who came upon Jesus to bind up the broken fall upon us anew, empowering and motivating us to proclaim deliverance to captives, good news to the poor, and freedom to the oppressed. This we pray in the name of and for the sake of the One whom you sent to proclaim peace, to break down all the walls of hostility, and to bind together all who call upon your name. Amen and amen.*