



Multiply

John 12:20-26

Rev. Brian Tillman

Washington Street UMC

March 21, 2021

It was, February 18, 1965, in a very tiny tiny rural town called Marion, Alabama. There was a prayer meeting and rally at a church. It was a Methodist church. A church that would eventually bare the United Methodist name that we hold dear now. This meeting was organized to sing songs, pray, and to help organize citizens of the town and surrounding areas so that they, the black citizens, could register to vote. The meeting was led by the Rev. CT Vivian representing the SCLC. In that prayer meeting at a Methodist church that night, there were about 500 people in attendance.

Just a few hundred feet away Rev. James Orange, was in the county jail and it was rumored that the guards were planning to cooperate in his lynching. The SCLC had joined other civil rights groups in the area who were working to help register Black voters who were being prevented from registering to vote. For decades, the county, that was heavily black, prevented its Black citizens from voting in elections. They were given polling tests that included questions like, how many state court judges are in the state of Alabama. If the black citizen answered correctly, they were asked to name them. They were required to recite the preamble to the constitution of the United States of America, if they were able to successfully do it, then there would be a jar filled with marbles that were placed on the counter and the citizen was asked to essentially guess how many marbles were in the jar. This prayer service was setup to pray and to hear from God about what they needed to do to be able to be recognized as full citizens and obtain their right to vote.

At some point in the night, the streetlights were shot out by police. And the Police began to raid the church. People started running. They were afraid for their lives. Marion, Alabama, is a really small town. There was no news crew filming it like we had at the US Capitol two months ago. The folks in the church were not doing anything that required a police presence. They weren't doing anything that jeopardized anyone's safety, unless you count their own safety. Yet, the police were there. Not to serve and protect. Quite the opposite. They were there to inflict pain and to make sure that these black folks would fear ever attempting to take part in our nations most crucial civil right, the right to vote.

People ran in all directions. One person there that night was 82-year-old Cager Lee, his daughter, Viola Jackson, and his 26-year-old grandson, Jimmie Lee Jackson.

Jimmie was an army veteran who had come back from serving this country in the military and was trying to keep his mom and his grandfather safe that night. When the police began to mercilessly beat those in and around the Methodist church, he whisked them into an eatery

behind the church and sat down to pretend to be patrons. The police were running around looking for those who had been assembled in the church and came into the establishment and was about to beat the 82-year-old, Mr. Lee. Jimmie didn't want his grandfather to be beaten and so he jumped between he and the officer and took the vicious blows. Other officers joined in and beat Jimmy some more. Then he was dragged outside and shot in the back. Jimmy was refused treatment at the hospital in Marion.

Do you know why Jimmie was refused treatment at the local hospital? It wasn't because Jimmie was Black. Jimmie's blackness was not the problem! It was their white supremacist racism that was the problem! It was because those who ran the hospital, the people in the town, the people in the county, the people in the state, the people in the south, and the people in the country... .. were racist! It was their racism that was the problem. It was a problem for Jimmie but it was their problem.

So, Jimmie had to be driven 28 miles to a hospital that would accept him in Selma Alabama. Jimmie would die 8 days later, on February 26, 1965. Dr. King preached the funeral and promised Jimmie's grandfather, Cager Lee, that he would not die before he gained the right to vote.

Days later, March 7th, 1965, black folks all over the country were grieving. Several civil rights organizations came together to plan a march from the town where Jimmie died, Selma, to Montgomery 54 miles away. The march was intended to demand justice for Jimmie from the Governor of Alabama, and to demand a voting rights act so that black people would not endure vicious beatings, poll taxes, poll tests, or any other forms of suppression in attempts to exercise their right to vote.

So, they were planning to march 54 miles—on foot—to Montgomery, Alabama to the state capitol which once served as the capitol of the treasonous Confederate States of America. The march was begun on, March 7, 1965.

The 600 or so marchers gathered at the Browns Chapel AME church in Selma and began their march. The march would require them to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, named for the Grand Dragon of the KKK.

Did you hear me? The bridge was named for the leader of the KKK who also served in the Confederate Army. They began to march across that bridge and when they reached the pinnacle of the bridge and looked down at the bottom of the bridge in front of them, they could see a sea of police. Some on horses. They saw a bunch of local citizens and a few news cameras too.

In the front lines of the marchers were John Lewis and Hosea Williams. Undeterred, they kept moving and the officers started to run towards them and mercilessly beat them. The beatings at the foot of that bridge were filmed all across America. The nation watched as Mrs. Amelia

Boynton was beaten. The nation watched as John Lewis was beaten over the head until his skull was fractured.

What America didn't see was the officers chasing the marchers back to the church and beating them there, chasing marchers back to their homes and beating them there. This unprovoked violence was levied on peaceful non-violent protesters.

In chapter 12 of the Gospel of John, Jesus also led a peaceful non-violent protest that also resulted in violence by the oppressive system in Jesus's day. The march Jesus led is what we call the triumphal entry, where Jesus rides into town on donkey.

Normally, when the emperor would come to a city in their empire, there would be a parade to welcome him. He'd ride in on a war horse declaring that the city would be safe because of his military might. The people would line the streets to meet him outside the city gates and bring him into the city.

Jesus wants to deliver a clear message when he comes to Jerusalem. He comes as the King of kings and Lord of lords but not because of military might. He doesn't come on a war horse. He comes riding a donkey to symbolize that his revolution is not one that is won with violence. It's won with non-violence but that still includes direct action that results in the liberation of the people. Even if that direct action results in his own death, the victory will be won. So, he tells his disciples in verse 24, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

Jesus is telling his disciples and he's telling us that he is a seed that if planted in the ground, it does not die, it multiplies! So do not fear what the outside forces wish to do to you for standing up for what is right.

In this country we hear a lot about "standing up for what we believe in." We are shown stories of people who are said to have great courage for "standing up for what they believe in." But doesn't it matter what we actually believe? I mean, if we believe in genocide, should we stand up for that? If we believe in white supremacy and racism, should we stand up for that? If we believe in sexism, should we stand up for that? If we believe in islamophobia, if we believe in homophobia, if we believe in police brutality with impunity, if we believe in corporate profits over people, if we believe in voter suppression, wouldn't it better if we sat down and instead of standing up, we shut up?!

We should not value standing up for what we believe in if what we believe in is oppressive, suppressive, and depressive! These aren't values we should hold! The value we should hold deeply to is to stand up for what is RIGHT! For what is JUST! Even if it differs from that which we were taught. We know well, that people are quick to believe lies. We saw that a few weeks at the Capitol when folks chose to believe a lie about a supposed stolen election. They were standing up for what they chose to believe in. But they knew, they knew they weren't standing up for what was RIGHT!

When we stand up for what is right, even those who oppose us know at their core that they are fighting against justice and righteousness. And so they try to provoke us to behave in ways that brings us down to a level where God cannot stand with us because we have responded to violence with violence and God see's two of his children fighting.

When we are standing up for what is right, it matters how we stand up if we want to be used by God to multiply and be fruitful. If we want to be a seed that God multiplies, how and why we are planted matters!

Those marchers on that bridge knew that what they believed in and what was right were in synch with the will of God so much so that they took no regard for their own safety. They were rooted in non-violent principles. The principles taught by Dr. King were ones he learned from a United Methodist pastor named Rev. James Lawson and also from the example set by Gandhi in India. As found in Dr. King's book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, there are 5 basic principles of non-violent resistance:

1. Non-violent resistance is not for cowards. It's not silent or inactive. It resists!
2. It does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent but to eventually win understanding and hope for understanding.
3. Non-violent resistance is not aimed at people. It's aimed at forces of evil and structures that oppress.
4. Is A willingness to accept suffering without retaliation and to accept blows without the desire to strike back. If one holds the desire to strike back, they were asked to not participate.
5. It avoids external physical violence but also internal violence. It's rooted in love. It is a refusal to hate the opponent that drives the non-violent action.

These 5 principals were on the hearts and minds of the marchers on that fateful day, March 7, 1965. This is why they took the beating and there was not a single one who hit or used violence against those who assaulted them. That took great love and great courage.

If you think they showed great courage on March 7, 1965 by enduring the beating, how much more did they show on March 21st, when the same marchers showed up again. Today is March 21, 2021. it is the 56th anniversary of the beginning of a 54 mile march towards voting rights. But this time it wasn't just 600. It was thousands more! Thousands of people flooded to Selma after seeing the massacre on the bridge memorialized as Bloody Sunday. They showed up to finish the 54 mile march. Do you know who was among them? John Lewis.

John Lewis was still hospitalized with a fractured skull from being beaten on the bridge but was determined to march. The doctors at the hospital pleaded with him not to do it. They told him that no man could ever march 5 days marching with his injuries while sleeping on cots in tents and survive. No man could survive. But, John Lewis wasn't just a man. He was a grain of wheat! Even if this march cost him his life, he was going to take every one of those steps.

He'd convinced the doctors of his conviction and they got him to agree to be driven back to the hospital every night to be treated and observed over night and then taken back to the front lines of the march to resume marching with the others over those 5 days. And he wasn't alone. When they reached the city limits of Montgomery, some 54 miles later, there were 25,000 people with them. Those 600 grains of wheat had multiplied to produce much fruit.

Sadly today, the voting rights act that was literally written on that 54-mile journey from Selma to Montgomery is under attack in our nations capital and in states across the country based on the lies of a single man and his enablers who were fairly, sternly, and definitively defeated at the ballot box across America. The response to this just defeat is not to seek righteousness. The response to this moral rebuke was not contrition. The response was instead to continue to attack the ability of people to exercise the most basic right granted by this country to its citizens, the right to vote in free and fair elections.

States across the country are working to take away the right to vote for the most oppressed and marginalized people in the nation. Reducing the number of early voting days. Complicating the vote by mail system to the point that it deters people from using it. Limiting ballot drop box locations. Stiffening voter ID laws while also closing locations where those ID's can be obtained. Making provisions that allow state legislatures to take over county and local election offices that vote against their particular party. They are even passing bills that are aimed at taking away Sunday voting because Black churches have used Sunday voting to promote what we call "souls to the polls." This is where after church services on Sundays, we carpool to voting locations and cast our votes together.

All of this is the result of an election that was among the safest and fairest in our nations history. All of this while we had the greatest number of voters in our nation's history.

Well, I've got bad news for those bent on this disgusting and evil enterprise. It won't work! It won't work! Why, because souls to the polls doesn't just happen on Sundays. God's children will have church any day of the week, any time of the day, and any season of the year. We will do soul to the polls at 2am on a Thursday morning if we have to. Why, because the more God's people are oppressed, the more they are attacked, the more they are cut down, the more they are beaten, the more they are killed, they don't die. They multiple!

See, you can kill a voting rights act, but you can't kill the will and intent of the people!
You can kill the dreamer, but you can't kill the dream!
You can destroy the marcher, but you can't destroy the march toward justice!
You can crucify the savior, but you can't crucify salvation!
You can trample on these seeds, but they will grow and bear much fruit!

I was recently shown a video of Mother Teresa demonstrating to a reporter what she calls the 5 finger Gospel. She used it to show people in a simple way that what they do to others in the light or in the dark, are known to God. This is true for both the oppressed and for the oppressor. It supports non-violent resistance and serves as a warning for the ones resisting

oppression, and the ones who are being resisted and stand oppose justice. It's five simple words, but the weight of them are enormous. Mother Theresa takes the reporters hand and does this: You Did It To Me

That's it. You did it to me.

When unjust laws are passed, you did it to me.

When the church moves to dehumanize and ostracize people who are born different, you did it to me.

When the one who sexually assaults or sexually harasses, you did it to me.

When the school system creates a financial and resource imbalance among schools in the same system that creates drastically different outcomes, you did it to me.

When the justice system punishes people who commit the same crime differently based on race, you did it to me.

When corporations and CEO's rake in billions of dollars while paying their employees so little that they are forced to apply for social services which are viciously opposed by the same corporations and CEO's, you did it to me.

When the local and state police beat Amelia Boynton, John Lewis and 600 others on that bridge, you did it to me.

When those officers tasked with protecting and serving killed Jimmie Lee Jackson, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, you did it to me.

When laws are passed intended to prevent eligible voters from voting to compel the government to show concern for all of its citizens, you did it to me.

When the opposers of grace, mercy, justice, righteousness, and love move to cut down God's people, you did it to me.

And, there is a price to pay. Even if I were the richest person in the world, I wouldn't have enough to pay the price that will come. You did it to me.

People of God, stand up for what is right. Do so with non-violent resistance rooted in love. And we should do so, even if it results in our own demise... because we are all grains of wheat that don't die; we multiple.

In the name of God the creator, Jesus the redeemer, and the Holy Spirit the sustainer. Amen. Amen. And Amen.