

**The Power at Work Within Us**  
Ephesians 3:14-21

*Third Sunday after Pentecost/ 21<sup>st</sup> June 2020*

In 1942, Bayard Rustin, a young Quaker from West Chester, Pennsylvania, boarded a bus in Louisville, Kentucky, bound for Nashville. Rustin sat in the second seat from the front of the bus. When the bus driver noticed and told him to sit in the back, he responded with the potentially world-altering question, “Why?”

“Because that’s the law,” the driver said. “Niggers ride in the back.”

Rustin said, “My friend, I believe that is an unjust law. If I were to sit in back I would be condoning injustice.” The driver repeated the request after each stop. Shortly, Rustin heard sirens and saw a police car and two motorcycles. The driver called the police. Four policemen got on board, started shouting at Rustin, and asked him to get up. When he asked why again, they kept shouting.

“I believe that I have a right to sit here,” he said softly. “If I sit in the back of the bus I am depriving that child”—he gestured to a nearby child of five or six years—“of the knowledge that there is injustice here, which I believe it is his right to know. It is my sincere conviction that the power of love in the world is the greater power existing. If you have a greater power, my friend, you may move me.”

Since he wouldn’t move, they started beating Rustin, kicked him to the floor, dragged him out of the bus, where the beating and kicking continued. Reminding himself that resistance would lead to more kicks, he forced himself to be still. Once they slowed down, he stood up and with his arms spread out said, “There is no need to beat me, I am not resisting you.”

At the sight of this, three Southern white men became agitated, got off the bus, and loudly objected to Rustin’s treatment. One smaller man grabbed a policeman’s club and said, “Don’t you do that!” When another policeman moved to strike the smaller man, Bayard stepped between them and, facing his advocate, said, “Thank you, but there is no need to do that. I do not wish to fight. I am protected well.”

In the car, Rustin sat between two policemen in the back, and two seated in the front. They tried to get him to fight, to lash out. He took out a piece of paper to calm himself, to write out a New Testament passage. A policeman took the paper, read it, crumpled it, and pushed it in his face.

From the backseat, Rustin caught the eye one of the policemen in front, who quickly looked away. Rustin later wrote, “I took renewed courage from the realization that he could not meet my eye because he was aware of the injustice being done.” Rustin leaned forward, touched his shoulder, and said, “My friend, how do you spell ‘difference’?”

When he arrived at the police station, they searched his bags and found a copy of the *Christian Century* magazine. The captain summoned him to the desk.

“What can I do for you?” Rustin asked.

“Nigger, you’re supposed to be scared when you come here!” the captain shouted.

Rustin said, “I am fortified by truth, justice, and Christ. There’s no need for me to fear.” The captain looked at his officers and said, “I believe [he’s] crazy.”

Rustin was eventually released—this time—because the truth was heard and people were willing to come to his defense.<sup>1</sup>

Bayard Rustin (1912-1987) was a leader in the civil rights movement and later the gay rights movement. He himself was gay. Rustin participated in many similar “freedom rides,” in what was known as the [Journey of Reconciliation](#), in 1947, to end segregation on buses. He later served as deputy director and chief organizer of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963. Bayard was a close friend and advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr. In 2013, President Obama posthumously awarded Rustin the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

I wonder what Rustin would say to us today.



On Friday and Saturday evenings, the 224th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) gathered virtually “in” Baltimore. The General Assembly, our denomination’s biennial family reunion, was supposed to be here this year. The theme for this Assembly, From Lament to Hope, was chosen when we decided to go virtual, back in March.

Lament fills our days. 8.7 million COVID-19 cases, worldwide, and 461,000 deaths. 2.9 million cases in the United States, and 121,000 deaths. We lost a church member to COVID last week, the second member to die from the virus.

Lament fills our streets in the holy cries for racial justice and fairness, protests denouncing the interlocking injustices of systemic racism and poverty are calling for, dreaming for a different world, where difference is celebrated as sacred and good, where Black Lives Matter.

Lament fills the church—or should fill the church. Can you hear them? Songs and cries and prayers of intercession, pleading with God on behalf of God’s people for a new world rooted and grounded in love, not hate. Rooted and grounded in love, not fear. And we need to lament—really lament—especially the church, for lament that is honest and real and raw can lead the way toward hope. But the way goes through lament.

On Friday morning this week the Opening Worship of the General Assembly will move from lament to hope. Our out-going co-moderators, Vilmarie Cintron-Olivieri and Cindy Kohlmann chose as their text these stirring words from Ephesians 3. It's really a prayer of intercession that the church might be strengthened for the holy work set before us.

And this brings me back to a bus bound for Nashville back in 1942.

The Ephesians text reminds us, and therefore encourages us, to remember one essential fact. In all the challenges and trials, fears and frustrations confronting us today, there is a greater power at work within us. Rustin relied on that power and he acted from *within* that power.

And it's crucial for the church to know this today because the forces of hate and fear and death are still with us and seem to be gaining strength by the hour. The forces pushing against the radical, transforming power of God's redeeming love are enormous. But there is a greater power at work within us (Eph. 3:20). And the church "fortified by truth, justice and Christ," is called to serve its Lord, who uses the power unveiled to us on a cross, the power of weakness and suffering that withstands the brute force of hate and destruction and nothingness, which authoritarian types can't seem to understand.

It's a different kind of power, God's power. There is a different kind of power at work within us. Not the power given by the world. Not the power used by political or economic systems—or a billy club or gunpoint or teargas or riot gear. The power I'm talking about does not belong to us. It does not come from us. And we can't use it. Instead, it's a power that flows *through* us, if we but step aside and allow ourselves to be used for the sake of the gospel, used for the sake of God's redemptive love seeking to heal and restore the world. It's a power, as Rustin knew, enabling us to do and be far more than we could ever ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20).

Yes, there is much that is calling us to lament these days, but there's still more that's summoning us forward with hope. And that hope is grounded in the fact that there is a power, *God's* power revealed through Jesus Christ and alive in us through the Spirit. That power is at work within us—both individually and together—working to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20).

May we have the courage—and guts—to claim this hope. Then "strengthened in our inner being" (Eph. 3:16), fortified by truth, justice and Christ, may we be open to what the Spirit is striving to root and ground in us (Eph. 3:17), striving to realize and embody in us and through us—and then let us get out of the way.

May it be so.

"To God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3:21).



Bayard Rustin (L) in Washington, D.C., August 1963.

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<sup>1</sup> I am deeply grateful for David Dark's permission to use his telling of this story, almost verbatim. The full account may be found in his recent work [\*The Possibility of America: How the Gospel Can Mend Our God-Blessed, God-Forsaken Land\*](#) (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 146-148.