

Birmingham

Dorothy Boulton

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

February 12, 2023

Scripture

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Sermon

(Singing)

*"Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, turn me 'round, turn me 'round.
Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round, I'm gonna keep on a-walking, keep on a'talking,
Marching on to freedomland."*

"Ain't gonna let injustice turn me 'round...."

Sixty years ago, in the spring of May 1963, those words were sung by black schoolchildren in the city of Birmingham, Alabama. They were gathered just outside of Kelly Ingram park, preparing to cross over into the downtown commercial district of the city. Their goal was to be arrested, to fill the city jails in protest, protest against racism, segregation, and horrific inhumanity.

They were choosing life.... choosing freedom. These children were choosing to put their bodies on the line in acts of non-violent protest so the world could see that the forces of death and destruction were no match for spirits filled with love and purpose and the power of God.

This I learned about and saw evidence of first-hand during my trip to Birmingham late last month. The Association of Partners in Christian Educators was having its annual gathering at the convention center in Birmingham, which was walking distance from the site of activities which were central to the Civil Rights movements of the 1960's.

Birmingham, Alabama, the industrial center of the south in those days, was known as the "most segregated city in America." Racial segregation, as we know, was a systematic evil that was manifest in all areas of society. What did it look like? There were separate schools for black and

white students, which were not at all equal -- white schools received updated facilities, textbooks, equipment; Black students had inferior buildings, outdated textbooks, handed-down equipment – if it was provided at all.

African Americans could not be served at a lunch counter, could not try on clothing in department stores, -- if they could enter either of these at all. They could not rent a room -- there were “Whites only” motels, could not rent or buy a house in any other part of town than the designated “black neighborhoods.” There were whites only waiting sections in bus terminals, public transit was divided into white and black seating areas, jobs for people of color were restricted to lower wage professions, and, of course, voting rights for black citizens were restricted or unobtainable. You’ve probably seen photos of the water fountains that illustrate such foundational disparities - inequalities - where the fountain labeled white is new, shiny, with clear cool water and the one labeled black pours out water that is tepid, the porcelain is cracked. Everything had been designed to make the statement that a person of color is inferior in every way possible.

Yes, of course there were protests in Birmingham. And there was incredible violence in that city, and many others. On one of my walks through the city streets there was a large poster that showed the Freedom Riders who were traveling on Greyhound buses – whites and blacks who were actively protesting the segregated transportation system – and others who were coming to help with voter registration – who were taken off buses and nearly beaten to death when they entered Birmingham in 1961.

Black parents were stabbed when they tried to enroll their children in a white school. African American leaders’ homes were bombed because they dared to speak up against violence against black citizens. This happened so many times that the city’s nickname actually became “Bombingham.”

I was with a group on a civil rights tour that went to the 16th Street Baptist Church, the site of a bombing that took place on a Sunday morning, where four beautiful and precious African American girls were killed in a women’s rest room as they were getting themselves ready to help lead the youth worship service that day. 14 year olds Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson and 11 year old Cynthia Wesley were killed and dozens were injured by that explosion. And no one was convicted for their murder at the time, even though one of the white suspect’s nicknames was “Dynamite Bob.”

This church, located on the edge of Kelly Ingram park, was a beacon for civil rights, and these girls were martyrs to the cause. The photo, by the way, on the front cover of the bulletin is from a stained glass window that was given to the church after the bombing, to replace one that had been destroyed. It shows a black Jesus on a cross, words underneath (which you can’t see in this photo) are from the gospel of Matthew and read: You Do it To Me.

When we had our tour of the sanctuary, our guide told us that the congregation was reluctant to receive this gift which came from the people of Wales that had heard about the tragic events. Why do you suppose they might be reluctant? No, it wasn’t the radical idea of a black Jesus... they were rightly afraid that such a powerful and startling --- and appropriate --witness would bring even more acts of violence against the church building and the people in it.

All these stories, these visual reminders and lessons throughout the city, and in the Civil Rights Museum which is also just across the street from the church and the park..... these were profound, disturbing, heart-rending for me, and I hope for all who see and experience them. The best way to describe it is “standing on holy ground.”

“Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me ‘round.....”

A week before I went to Birmingham, on Martin Luther King, Jr Sunday, I shared a story during the children's message called "Let the Children March." It is a first-person account of a child during the Children's March, or, the Children's Crusade. I recalled it often as I stood on the place where these children gathered, and walked in the streets where they walked.... historical markers outlining their route have been placed throughout the city.

The Children's Crusade took place because the civil rights protests in Birmingham in early 1963 had stalled. It had become difficult for adults to march, to protest, because there were serious consequences to those actions. Bull Connor, the white Commissioner of Public Safety, had them arrested. You may recall the famous letter penned by Dr. King, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." People were fired from their jobs if they were seen on a picket line and would be left without the means to provide for their families.

The action plan on the part of Civil Rights leaders to expose the brutality and inhumanity of segregation needed marchers, protestors, --- the plan was to overwhelm the prison system with arrests ---but it was proving way too difficult and perilous for adults to do.

"Who will go?" went out the question from the church pulpits.

And it was the students, the teenagers, the children who stood up and said, "I'll do it. I'm not afraid to go to jail."

These volunteers were trained in non-violence. They were told if you can't do this non-violently, then this is not the time and place for you. A day was chosen.... and the students came. Gathering at the 16th Street Baptist church, they came. They came from local schools (teachers turned their backs to the classroom, facing the chalkboard so they could say they didn't see anyone leave as their students climbed out the first floor windows.) They walked from the outlying towns. They chose to come and walk and march and sing out for freedom.

Before leaving the church, before heading out the doors, they sang the songs of the movement:

"Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around..."

This little light of mine

We Shall Overcome

The children went out in groups of 50. They crossed the Kelly Ingram park. And the police were waiting and promptly arrested them and took them to jail. They kept coming. They kept walking. The first day almost 1000 children filled the cells.

The second day they sang, they marched. Interviewers asked them why, they responded: "I want equal rights. I want to be treated just like everyone else." But on this day, Bull Connor had a different tactic. He had the fire fighters turn the firehoses on the peaceful protestors. Hoses that took four grown men to control were blasting children, sweeping them off their feet, tearing clothes from their bodies. And he called out the dog handlers too. Specially-trained dogs, "police dogs", attacked the children.

This was documented in photos. It was shown on television. The world saw what was going on in Birmingham, and was shocked, appalled, and outraged.

Over several days, over 5000 arrests were made. Children... some as young as four years old...were in jail. There were so many they had to be put in school buses and taken to the state fair grounds. The arrested children were thrilled – the fair grounds were off-limits to people of color. It was the first time they'd ever been.

President Kennedy who was one of those watching all this unfold was moved to take action, leading him to express support for federal rights legislation, eventual passage of the Civil Rights Act took place in 1964.

"On May 10, 1963, the city of Birmingham itself agreed to desegregate lunch counters, restrooms, drinking fountains and fitting rooms, to hire African Americans as salespeople and clerks, and to release the jailed demonstrators."

nps.gov/articles/16thstreetbaptist.htm

I think of those magnificent, brave, dedicated children as I read today's text, Moses' words to the people of Israel who had been slaves in Egypt, who had wandered in the wilderness, and were now getting ready to cross over into the promised land, a land of freedom, a land of peace. "I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity." The people of God are commanded to "love the Lord your God and walk in God's ways." So, "choose life that you and your descendants may live."

Those children chose to march.... to walk.... to cross the dividing line that was keeping them from full citizenship, from expressing and living their full humanity. They chose to stand up against death, hatred, and yes, even against fear to expose the evil that racism brings to all people --- black and white. Their choice set people free. Such courage and determination and heroism cannot be celebrated and lifted up enough.

I think of the words of the apostle Paul to the church in Rome:

Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:35-39

To walk through that park and see the statues there.... the statue of children, "I ain't afraid ..." which is printed in the bulletin, the statues of dogs with their sharp canines -- leaping out, snarling, barking. There's a monument in the park that one walks through with those dogs leaping out on either side. Would I have had the courage? I doubt it.

The children sang:

*Ain't gonna let police dogs turn me round turn me round turn me round
Ain't gonna let fire hoses turn me round turn me round turn me round
Ain't gonna let Bull Connor turn me round
I'm gonna keep on walking, keep on talking, marching on to freedomland*

Moses' words to the people are the words to us today: Choose life.

Are we all free? Are we ALL free? Is there still some work to do to restore full humanity to all people – to the oppressors as well as the oppressed? Do we receive equal treatment under the law? Are there stories that are not being told? Being permitted to be told?

We know the answer to this.

Inspired by the courage and witness of children, of so many who have gone before us,

in faithfulness to our Lord Jesus Christ, let us lift our eyes to the promised land.
For the sake of love, for the sake of life, we still have some marching to do.

(Congregation sings)

*Lift every voice and sing till earth and heaven ring, ring with the harmonies of liberty.
Let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies; let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us;
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun, let us march on, till victory is won.*

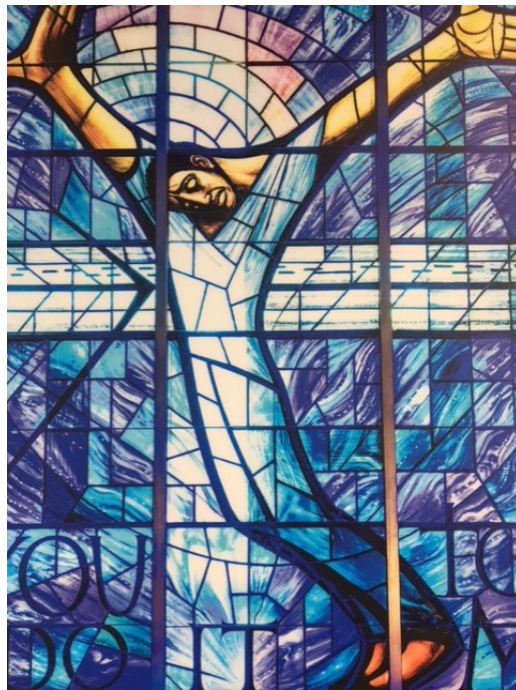


Image: The Wales Window of 16th Street Baptist Church.

Sources

“16th Street Baptist Church Bombing”, *National Park Service*, updated 19 September 2022, [nps.gov/articles/16thstreetbaptist.htm](https://www.nps.gov/articles/16thstreetbaptist.htm)