

## **"And the Choir Kept Singing of Freedom - Part I"**

*by Beth Lefever*

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The title for this week's sermon, and next, is taken from a song written by Richard Farina about the four little girls killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, in Birmingham in 1963. I want to tell you about the trip that introduced me, on an emotional level, to that church, and the Movement of which it was a part.

But I want to begin by telling you of our experience at another church...

We were a quiet group sitting in the pews of Zion Church in Marion, Perry County, Alabama. We were a group of people who'd been greeted warmly and graciously by several black members of the church, and who now waited with great anticipation as the first speaker was carefully wheeled down a roughly hewn wheelchair ramp at the front of the church.

Ms. Lizzie Kelley appeared quite old, though she was only 69. She had lost a portion of both legs, a result, I believe, of diabetes. She'd just come from dialysis and her family, we were told, was concerned about her appearance before us.

But she insisted. "This is important," she had told them, and they knew not to argue with her.

She was made up and dressed beautifully. She wore earrings and jewelry. Her appearance was also important to her.

She spoke quietly, and with great dignity.

"The first thing Dr. King told us," she said, "was that our actions had to be non-violent. He insisted on non-violence. He said that if we had so much as a straight pin in our clothes, to please remove it and leave it behind."

She paused for a minute, remembering. And then she continued.

"We each grabbed someone's hand and began walking up the center aisle of the church toward the door. But soon the line began to slow down. We couldn't understand what the hold up was. We didn't know that they were beating them as soon as they stepped outside the door.

"It was dark outside. There wasn't a light on in Marion. We could hear the sound of rifles clicking."

Again she pauses.

"My husband had gone to Selma to pick up the body of Jimmie Lee Jackson," she told us. (Jackson was a 26-year-old black activist from Marion, shot by a state trooper at a protest demonstration in Selma. He'd been trying to protect his mother and grandfather, who were being beaten with billy clubs by troopers.)

We rested with her, for a moment, in the telling. And then she changed topics.

"I was on the bridge on Bloody Sunday," she continued. "I was in the March to Montgomery. I was in the second line, right behind Dr. King, Rev. Abernathy, Andrew Young and the others."

We are right there with her as she recalls the terrifying events of 41 years ago. She concludes with an appeal:

"If you all, each of you, would tell just one other person what the movement meant to us, what it meant to this country..."

Ms. Lizzie Kelley died the next day. We got the word that evening at dinner. We were stricken. We were the last group to whom she was able to tell her story.

"If you each will tell just one person what the movement meant to us, and to this country..."

I mean to do that this morning, and again next week.

I cannot begin to do the story justice. I cannot begin to do justice to those who, with great grace, dignity, humor sometimes even, and forgiveness – always forgiveness, told us their stories: stories of violence, hatred, cruelty, torture and injustice; and then too, of courage, patience, determination, discipline and dignity; and finally of redemption, forgiveness and love.

But I will do what I can. It is important for me to do what I can. It is important for you that I do what I can.

[Song: "Go Tell It On the Mountain" Fannie Lou Hamer]

It was hard to decide how to tell you these stories. It quickly became apparent to me that I could not do so in just one service. It's also clear that I can't do it in two services.

There's a lot I must leave out, and so I will leave out, to a great extent, the facts of the matter: the chronology, the names and dates and legal issues, all that stuff you either already know about, or can read about or research yourselves.

I will tell you instead, what we experienced; what I experienced, and how it affected me. Next week I will tell you more of the same, with an emphasis on what happens next. But for now, let me tell you of the experience.

In nine days, we visited 14 cities or towns, and heard approximately 32 speakers, not counting the fifteen students among us who presented papers along the way. It was a rigorous schedule.

Some of these speakers were well known African Americans, such as the Rev. Samuel Kyles, Hollis Watkins and Minnijean Brown Trickey, one of the Little Rock Nine who

helped to integrate Arkansas schools in 1957. (She is now a writer and social worker in Ontario, Canada.)

Some were relatively well-known white activists such as Rev. Robert Graetz, and the Rev. Ed King.

Others, though, were unknown, common, every-day people, just like you and me - though I fear with far greater courage and a far greater capacity to forgive than I probably have.

[Song: "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round" SNCC Freedom Singers]

I was struck by all of these speakers, without exception. I was struck by their stories, for I did not know. I was a child in the 50's, a teenager in the 60's, and I did not know. I lived in the north. Neither my family, nor my friends, nor my schools were invested in the struggle, or in making us aware of the struggle.

I am appalled at how little I knew. I am appalled at how painful the stories. I am appalled at the sheer magnitude of the injustice and suffering visited upon a people in our own country, in my own time.

Children my age were demonstrating for freedom. Children my age were being beaten and killed and washed down the street by fire hoses pouring forth with enough velocity to shear the bark off of trees. Children my age were being set upon by dogs, and they were being jailed.

[Speech: MLK "Keep Moving"]

The Movement received criticism for allowing children to participate in the demonstrations. King addressed this in the segment you just heard. What he did not say, though, was that the children very much wanted to be involved. And more poignantly, their presence was needed; their parents could not afford the loss of work they were incurring because of repeated incarcerations.

I did not hear stories that the children were beaten while in jail. Certainly they were beaten in the streets; some, such as 14-year-old Emmett Till, were murdered — lynched. But beatings of adults did occur in the jails. Several speakers told of it. One of the white ministers described his own experiences of torture while jailed saying, "we were made to assume painfully uncomfortable positions in terribly hot conditions for long periods of time" - sounds sadly familiar, doesn't it?

When jailers wanted to go further, they released prisoners late at night, for the Klan to deal with them. That's what happened to Chaney, Goodman and Schwemer.

One of the speakers we heard was Angela Lewis, age 42, daughter of James Chaney. She met us at her father's gravesite, hidden in a clearing in the woods, and buttressed by steel girders against vandalism.

She was 10 days old when her father was murdered, and he, out of town working with the Freedom Summer campaign, never saw her.

"After his death, my family kept me a secret," she told us. "They thought it would be safer for me that way. And they never told me much about him, either."

She has only begun to learn about her father in recent years.

Her visit with us was affecting, and in response, the group – spontaneously it seemed - moved together, linking hands with each other and with Angela to sing that great song of the movement, "We Shall Overcome."

[Song: "We Shall Overcome" Mass meeting participants at Hattiesburg, MS]

We sang that song three times on the tour; one of them was to the accompaniment of a beautiful pipe organ played by Dorothy Posey Jones who had been the organist for Rev. Ralph Abernathy during the years of the Movement.

There is so much I want to tell you, and time is so limited.

I want to tell you about being in Dr. King's home, about being in Medgar Evers' home, about being at the Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King was assassinated.

I want to tell you about Samuel Kyles, a close friend who was with Dr. King at the Lorraine Motel when he was murdered.

I want to tell you about Simeon Wright, 14-year-old Emmett Till's cousin, who was with Emmett when he was taken from his bed and later, lynched for speaking to a white woman.

I want to tell you about Maya Linn's Civil Rights Memorial at the Southern Poverty Law Center and our walk, in silence, across the Edmund Pettus Bridge where Bloody Sunday occurred.

I want to tell you about Martin Luther King's epiphany, and what that has meant to me.

And I want to say that I know, now. I know, to the extent that a northern white woman can know forty and fifty years after the fact. I know, and that is important to me.

We have a responsibility as American citizens to know this history, because it is not finished. We have a responsibility as citizens of the world, to know this history, for it is a history that has affected the rest of the world.

Rev. Robert Graetz, a white activist in the Movement, told us, "Lech Walesa said that what happened in Poland would not have happened if not for the Montgomery bus

boycott. Nelson Mandela has said that what happened in South Africa would not have happened if not for the Montgomery bus boycott."

Rev. Ed King, another white activist, told us that Rachel Cory, an activist in Palestine, worked there for a movement modeled on Freedom Summer, the voting rights campaign of 1964.

Cory was killed for her cause, run over, at age 23, by a bulldozer as she attempted to stop homes in Palestine from being destroyed.

We have a responsibility to know this history.

We should know it too, though, because we are expanded, as human beings, when we encounter courage in the face of cruelty; forgiveness in the face of injustice; patience, determination and will in the face of relentless tyranny.

We are expanded when exposed to such a dogged insistence on non-violence as a response to violence in this massive struggle for dignity, fairness and basic human rights.

It is our history, a history to be ashamed of, on many accounts, and a history to be proud of on account of those who worked so hard and gave so much to see it unfolded in a fairer, more just, way.

I will tell you more of it next week. But in closing today, if you will please rise, as you are able, and join me in singing "We Shall Overcome."

You don't need your hymnals; I'll call out the words...