



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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## Do Not Say That I Am Only a Boy . . .

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 25, 2013*

*The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Luke 13:10-17*

Yesterday over 100,000 people marched in Washington, D.C., to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The 1963 March occurred 100 years after the Emancipation Proclamation.

And yet 150 years after slavery ended in this country, we continue to fight against economic injustice and racial discrimination. Living with the burden of this history on our backs, it is only too easy to respond like Jeremiah the prophet who, when the word of the Lord came to him, responded, "Ah Lord God, truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." If we do, the Lord will say to us as he said to Jeremiah: "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you, Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you."

There is an excerpt from a film called *Cracking the Codes* that has been circulating on Facebook this week, which I have shared on the St. Bart's Facebook page. But in case you have not checked it out, I will recount the tale.

Two women walk into the grocery store. The first woman is half black and half white. She looks white, has blue eyes, and is greeted warmly by the woman behind the checkout counter. They make small talk and the first woman writes a check to pay for her groceries. It is accepted without question and she moves on. The second woman, a black woman with her ten-year-old little girl, is treated differently. The checker does not greet her, there is no small talk, and she does not even look her in the eye as she checks out her groceries. And when she presents a check, the black woman is asked for two forms of identification. The black woman looks at her daughter, who has noticed the difference in treatment and is at the point of tears. She looks at the two white elderly women behind her, and she decides to say nothing and presents her identification. The woman behind the counter pulls out the "bad check" book and begins to search for the black woman's license. At this point the first woman, the one who only appeared white, comes back and says, "Excuse me. "Why are you asking her for all this information?" The woman behind the counter says, "This is our policy." The first woman says, "No, it is not. Or you did not follow policy when I checked out." The woman behind the counter said says, "Oh, but you been coming here for so long." And the first woman says, "No, in fact I have not. But my sister-in-law who you've just discriminated against has been coming to this store for years and recommended it to me when I moved to town three months ago." This changed the conversation. Instead of an angry black woman objecting to the way she had been treated, everyone from the manager of the store, who came to see what was happening, to the other people standing in line, to the ten-year-old little girl knew that discrimination would not go unchallenged this time. The first woman had used her white privilege to lift the burden of discrimination from her sister-in-law and allow her to stand upright. Once she had said this, to paraphrase the words of the Gospel, the woman behind the checkout had been put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at the wonderful thing that the first woman had done.

Have you ever believed in something? I am not talking about merely agreeing with something or giving assent to some creed or set of beliefs. I am talking about belief in an idea, a project or a person that captures you wholeheartedly. Like a new love or a cause which demands our full attention. When we believe in something it infatuates us, awakens our passion, and we give our whole selves away.

We believe in what we are doing, and we commit ourselves to it with our whole being. We continue to push forward even when obstacles arise or doors close. Because we believe in our

dream, we persevere beyond the initial phase of infatuation and continue because it means everything to us.

Believing in something is what faith is all about. It is a singular organizing principle, a way of thinking and acting that changes everything. Believing in something is different from the ordinary understanding of belief. Most of what we call beliefs are nothing more than position statements or theological propositions. When we confuse our beliefs with the experience of believing in something, we are cut off from the passion, the energy that informs our faith. And our religious life can become a list of things we ought to do and things other people ought not to do. On the other hand believing in something connects us to something that is greater than us—Paul Tillich says the ground of our being—that is, to God and enables us to live a life of faith.

Jesus was a man of great faith. He believed passionately in the Kingdom of God. And he believed that by practicing faith in the Kingdom of God we contribute to its establishment on earth, in the here and now. When the occasion called for it, Jesus was ready to transgress the most important rules and regulations of his day for the sake of the Kingdom of God. He gave himself to practicing his faith in the Kingdom of God even when it cost him his life.

Earlier this month the White House announced that Bayard Rustin, a trailblazing civil rights activist and a man of great faith, will be posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Rustin was the primary organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

Rustin was born in 1912. In high school, in the late twenties, he was arrested for refusing to sit in the West Chester, Pennsylvania, movie theater's segregated balcony. Sixty years later at the end of his life Rustin wrote:

"My activism did not spring from my being black. Rather, it is rooted fundamentally in my Quaker upbringing and the values that were instilled in me by my grandparents who reared me. Those values are based on the concept of a single human family and the belief that all members of that family are equal...."

Rustin practiced that faith in the oneness of the human family, and it animated his life and motivated him to continue the fight for economic justice and racial equality long after the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was over.

And yet even today we know that we are not yet free, but we must not be discouraged. We must continue the March.

Practically speaking what can we do? How can we practice the faith of Jesus? We can join with the poor and serve with them to help them recover from the ravages of poverty. A group of volunteers from St. Bart's yesterday went to Staten Island, and they report that there is still work to do. Go to the St. Bart's Facebook page to see their picture and a picture of the work they did. Orientation for new volunteers for the Sandy recovery efforts, as well as the soup kitchen, shelter and pantry will be held tomorrow night in the Vestry Room. See the insert in you bulletin for details.

In addition we can learn about and fight against the mechanisms of oppression and racial discrimination, such as racial profiling and the police strategy known as Stop and Frisk. Watch the harrowing and complicated tale of Oscar Julius Grant in the new documentary movie *Fruitvale Station* at the Angelika Theatre.

But whatever we do, we may not say that we are too young and we do not know how to speak, or we do not know what to do. We must speak up in the face of injustice and discrimination wherever we encounter it and whatever its origin. When we see injustice we must use any power or privilege we have to stand with the oppressed and lift the burden of oppression from their backs so that they may stand proud once again. We must be willing to dream the dream of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bayard Rustin. We must share the faith of Jesus and continue to work for economic justice, racial equality, and peace among all peoples until God's will is done here on earth as it is in heaven.

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