

Sit Down, Sit Down for Jesus

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

January 17, 2016—Martin Luther King, Jr. Day observance

- Proverbs 3:5-8 Remember the Lord in everything you do, and he will show you the right way. (v. 6)
- 2 Timothy 1:1-10 For the Spirit that God has given us does not make us timid; instead, his Spirit fills us with power, love, and self-control. (v. 7)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God gives us strength and courage to do what is right.

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day is a Federal holiday for a reason: he had a profound and positive influence on the course of our nation's history. I think it's our privilege and duty to reflect on how he brought about the beginning of societal change by bringing into the sight of all of America the evil that is discrimination and racial segregation.

But today I want to focus on another figure in our nation's ongoing struggle to offer equal rights to all citizens. On December 1st of last year *The Washington Post* ran an article by author and publisher Justin Taylor. The article was entitled "5 Myths about Rosa Parks." Everyone knows who Rosa Parks was: she was the African American seamstress who one night refused to give up her seat on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama to a white man. The *Post* article showed how we know only part of the story, and what we know is not entirely accurate. Plus, one of the things we probably didn't know is how faith influenced the attitude and action of Rosa Parks. The article began by setting the stage:

Shortly after 5 p.m., on a cool Alabama evening 60 years ago [on December 1st], a 42-year-old woman clocked out from her job as a seamstress at the Montgomery Fair Department Store. Rosa Parks [prepared] to board the Cleveland Avenue bus to make the five-mile, 15-minute trek back to her apartment at Cleveland Courts to cook supper for her husband, Raymond.

Encountering a standing-room-only bus and having been on her feet all day operating a huge steam press, Parks decided to cross the street and do some Christmas shopping at Lee's Cut Rate Drug while waiting for a less crowded bus. Around 6 p.m., as she boarded bus number 2857 at the corner of Montgomery and Moulton streets, Parks was about to change the course of the 20th century.

At this point, author Justin Taylor then presented what he called "five myths about what happened that first evening of December in 1955."

Myth No. 1. Rosa Parks sat in the whites-only section of the bus.

Montgomery municipal buses each had 36 seats. The first 10 were reserved for whites only. The last 10 seats were theoretically reserved for blacks. The middle 16 seats were first-come-first-serve, with the bus driver retaining the authority to rearrange seats so that whites could be given priority.

Parks was sitting in an aisle seat on the front row of this middle section. To her left, across the aisle, were two black women. To her right, in the window seat, was a black man.

Myth No. 2. If Rosa Parks had not moved, a white passenger would not have had a place to sit.

A few minutes later, when the bus reached the third stop in front of the Empire Theater, several white passengers boarded, and driver James E. Blake (1912-2002) noticed a white man standing near the front. He called out for the four black passengers in Parks' row to move to the back, where they would have to stand, as all of the seats were now taken.

They did not respond. Blake got out of his seat and instructed the four to move, saying, "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats." Three of the black passengers reluctantly proceeded to go and stand in the back of the bus. Parks, however,

refused to get up, sliding from the aisle seat to the window seat, which would have allowed for the white passenger to sit in any of the three seats in her row.

The bus driver asked: "Are you going to stand up?" Parks looked him in the eye and responded with a quiet but resolute, "No." She explained that she had gotten on board first, that she paid the same fare and that she wasn't sitting in the white section.

She didn't think it was fair that she had to stand for someone else to sit who arrived after her and that she was not violating the city ordinance. (She didn't complain how nonchivalrous it was that a supposed gentleman would make a woman stand so he could sit, or how irrational it was that he wouldn't even want to sit in the same row with her.)

"Well," Blake responded, "I'm going to have you arrested." Parks gave him the permission he did not request: "You may do that."

Blake called his supervisor, who advised him that after warning the passenger he had to exercise his power and put Parks off the bus. He then radioed the police, who sent [two] officers.

As they boarded the bus while several passengers exited through the rear, the officers debriefed Blake and then peacefully arrested Parks. "Why do you all push us around?" she asked the tired beat cops. [One] responded, "I don't know, but the law is the law and you're under arrest." They drove her in their squad car to the city jail, booked her and held her in a dank and musty cell.

Parks' boss and friend, [local] NAACP president E.D. Nixon, bailed her out that evening.

Myth No. 3. This was Rosa Parks' first conflict with that bus driver.

If Rosa Parks had been paying attention, she never would have gotten on the bus driven by the tall, blond, 43-year-old Blake. He had a reputation for spitting his tobacco juice, using derogatory language toward blacks (and black women in particular) and making black passengers pay their fare in the front of the bus but reenter in the rear, only to pull away before they could get back on.

A dozen years earlier—in November 1943—Blake had tried to make Parks exit and reenter his bus through the crowded rear entrance after she had already boarded his bus in the front. Parks refused, so Blake grabbed her sleeve to push her off the bus. She intentionally dropped her purse and sat down in the white section to retrieve it. As she looked at Blake, she warned him: "I will get off.... You better not hit me."

For the next 12 years, Parks intentionally avoided riding on Blake's bus, walking whenever she could, despite her chronic bursitis. But on Dec. 1, 1955, she absentmindedly boarded without noting that she was once again entering a bus driven by Blake. It proved to be a serendipitous mistake.

Myth No. 4. Rosa Parks refused to stand up because she was tired.

Parks sought to set the record straight: "People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I was at the end of a working day.... No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in." She later said she couldn't have lived with herself if she had given in and stood up.

To attribute her action to fatigue would have pointed to weakness rather than to the source of her strength. She insisted that the power to love her enemies came from God: "God has always given me the strength to say what is right."

A faithful member of St. Paul AME Church in Montgomery, which she referred to as her "special living room," Parks taught Sunday School during the 9:30 morning hour and helped prepare the Lord's Supper during the 10:30 hour. Her faith and her family of faith were lifelines of support. "I had the strength of God and my ancestors."

Myth No. 5. Rosa Parks was the first black woman to exercise civil disobedience on a Montgomery bus.

Nearly nine months before Rosa Parks' famous arrest, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin was arrested on a Montgomery bus for refusing to yield her seat to a white passenger. She

refused to move, began yelling about her constitutional rights and had to be physically removed from the bus by police officers.

Although Colvin's actions would not be the precipitating factor in the bus boycott, they did inspire Parks, who served as an activist and secretary with the Montgomery NAACP, which sought [whenever it could] to challenge Jim Crow laws [permitting legal discrimination and segregation]. Colvin joined four other plaintiffs in the court case *Browder v. Gayle*, challenging the constitutionality of the bus segregation ordinances of Montgomery.

[This paragraph was moved to the end of this extended quotation.]

Why did Parks' actions spark the boycott when a similar action by Colvin did not? Several answers can be given, based upon their differences in age, deportment, reputation and demeanor.

According to James Farmer, founder of the Congress of Racial Equality, what set Parks apart was that she had an almost "biblical quality." "There was," he recalled, "a strange religious glow about Rosa—a kind of humming Christian light."

When a Christian woman of her stature and humility was unjustly treated in that fashion, the leaders—including a 26-year-old Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., whose own church was just a half-mile east of where Parks was arrested—saw an opportunity and made their move.

"There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression," King explained at the mass meeting at Holt Street Baptist Church on the first day of the boycott....

[Paragraph re-inserted here:]

When the [United States] Supreme Court upheld the ruling [of *Browder vs. Gayle*] on Dec. 20, 1956, ordering Alabama to end racialized bus segregation, so ended the remarkable 381-day bus boycott by the black citizens of Montgomery, which had begun the Monday after Parks' arrest.¹

Far from being a beleaguered blue collar worker who was simply too exhausted to move, Rosa Parks displayed a God-inspired, God-fueled strength to stand up—no, to *sit down!*—for what is right. Parks said she relied on the strength of God and her faith in Jesus Christ to make her way along her path in life. Her strength and courage came from a faith which she had inherited from her ancestors.

I can only imagine that as a youthful pupil and later an adult teacher in her church's Sunday school, Rosa Parks was familiar with a verse we heard today from the book of Proverbs: "Remember the Lord in everything you do, and he will show you the right way."² The social and political world of Montgomery and Alabama and the Deep South and the entire nation were disrupted for the better because Rosa Parks knew the truth of the encouragement the apostle Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy. We heard Paul's words earlier: "For the Spirit that God has given us does not make us timid; instead, his Spirit fills us with power, love, and self-control."³

That same Spirit that filled a hard-laboring seamstress is the Spirit that's ready to work through you and me. God's Spirit is ready to show us the way when we wonder how we possibly can make any difference in the challenges we face.

Our challenges could be grand in scale, such as learning to live each day without fear despite the terrible, terrorizing scenes we see playing out on TV. Our challenges could be societal, such as wanting to prod the glacial pace of progress in achieving pay equality regardless of whether the work is performed by a woman or a man. Or we may experience our most difficult

¹ Excerpted and adapted from "5 Myths about Rosa Parks" by Justin Taylor for *The Washington Post*, Tuesday, December 1, 2015, reprinted in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* Friday, December 4, 2015, p. E6.

² Proverbs 3:6 Good News Translation

³ 2 Timothy 1:7 Good News Translation

challenges on a very personal level, such as mustering the courage to say “I’m sorry” to someone whose spirit has been wounded by something we said... or did... or failed to do.

Our challenges probably aren’t momentous, History Channel-worthy events like the Montgomery Bus Boycott. But our challenges are real to us.

And so is the power of God’s Spirit. “Two hymnals ago” the Presbyterian Church featured a hymn called “God Gives His People Strength.” Its simple lyrics speak of the assurance we have in God’s spirit to give us what we need:

God gives his people strength. If we believe in his way, he’s swift to repay all those who bear the burdens of the day.

God gives his people hope. If we but trust in his word, our prayers are always heard. He warmly welcomes anyone who’s erred.

God gives his people love. If we but open wide our heart, he’s sure to do his part; he’s always the first to make a start.

God gives his people peace. When sorrow fills us to the brim, and courage grows dim, he lays to rest our restlessness in him.⁴

All we know about Jesus shows us that he put his complete confidence in the power of God’s Holy Spirit to sustain him. The Holy Spirit encouraged and comforted Jesus through the attacks of skeptics, the abandonment of his friends, the threats to his personal safety and his very life.

The example of a humble, reverent Rosa Parks encourages us to remember that God will show us the way, because God’s Spirit doesn’t make us timid; God’s spirit fills us with power, with love, and with self-control.

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⁴ “God Gives His People Strength,” words and music by Miriam Therese Winters. Words and music © 1965 by Medical Mission Sisters, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Permission to reprint granted by Vanguard Music Corp., 250 W. 57th St., New York, New York 10019.