Through our choices day by day, we will be the success we aim for.”¹

Those words sum up Derrick Bell’s ardent, gentle and compelling memoir titled, Ethical Ambition.

“This through our choices day by day, we will be the success we aim for.”

Derrick Bell, a friend of our congregation who spoke here on a number of occasions, was a professor of Constitutional law, a creative legal scholar, and an activist who kept quitting his job or being fired for taking principled stands. He died last October at age 80, having lived many lives – some of them with life-threatening adventures and always with a spiritual passion for a good life, trying to do the right thing.

This morning I turn to his life and witness as part of the occasional series on Spirituality and Theology through Biography. Cor ad cor loquitur… that wonderful Latin phrase, which translates, “Heart speaking to heart.”

Ethical Inspirations

As one of his six markers of ethical success, which is true success in life, Derrick Bell invites us into ethical aspiration by emulating, “those individuals who face great ethical challenges and have stood their ground, had their say, and all too often paid a high price.”²

He directs our attention to a host of worthy models including Mohammad Ali, Dr. King, Malcolm X, Daniel Ellsberg, and Congresswoman Barbara Lee, who alone opposed President Bush’s rush to war after 9/11, the single dissenting vote. Among others, he praises Medgar Evers, Charlie Chaplin, Paul Robeson, and W. E. B. DuBois.

He concludes Ethical Ambition invoking a grand birthday celebration for W. E. B. Dubois. The year was 1958. On DuBois’ 90th birthday, over two thousand admirers gathered in the ballroom of the Roosevelt Hotel here in midtown in tribute to this pioneering scholar, civil and human rights activist, and whirlwind of justice-seeking humanity.

Offering the essence of his spirit, W. E. B. Du Bois “used the occasion to convey a legacy to the audience and to the world in which he had been so actively involved. Noting the presence of great-great-grandson, only a few months old, Du Bois said”,

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You will find it the fashion in the America where eventually you will live and work to judge life’s work by the amount of money it brings you. This is a grave mistake. The return from your work must be the satisfaction which that work brings you and the world's need of that work.

Income is not greenbacks, it is satisfaction; it is creation; it is beauty. It is the supreme sense of a world of men [and women] going forward, lurch and stagger though it may, but slowly, inevitably going forward, and you, you yourself with your hand on the wheels. Make this choice, then, my son. Never hesitate, never falter.³

Derrick Bell in his exploration of Life’s Meaning and Worth acknowledges the realities we know so well, the dreams, the vision… and

We do hesitate. We do falter….

Not everyone’s work escapes boredom, and some jobs may reflect little of the world’s needs.

He acknowledges the drudgery of some work and the necessity to find work to support family or ourselves. He knows that not all of us by circumstance, discrimination, family history, choice, or health, for example, not all of us may find deep satisfaction or beauty in our work.

Why We Are Here

However, whatever our situation, in reflecting upon life’s meaning, Derrick Bell advocates simple truths in a complex, compromising world.

He spoke of our “infinite interconnectedness”. He spoke of humanity “at its essence… [as] both an ongoing readiness to recognize wrongs and [to] try to make things better, and the desire to help those in need of assistance without expecting reward or recognition…. This is why we are here.”⁴

To help one another, and Ethical Ambition is his subject.

With ancient wisdom, he too invites us in the awareness of life’s brevity, to live with clarity, and thereby meaning is ours.

Challenging Racism

One chapter of Derrick Bell’s career took him to Harvard Law School in 1971 where he was influential in developing “critical race theory” that argues that ingrained white prejudice in the United States biases our legal system against Blacks and other minorities, sometimes even in efforts to transform our society. His 1973 Race, Racism
Beyond his creative analysis, his writings included provocative parables and fictional accounts to explore American culture and its oppressions of white supremacy, sexism, homophobia and abusive capitalism. In his 1992 short story titled “The Space Traders”, in good lawyerly fashion he offers a hypothetical:

What if aliens from another star system arrived on Earth and came to the United States? Upon arrival, they offered to trade us their advanced knowledge and magnificent technology to give us unlimited clean energy, to clean up the environment, and to restore our economic health and wealth. … All this … for what? All this in exchange for all the African Americans in our country.

The setting of this short story is the near future.

Everything would be white America’s for a simple trade… in exchange for all the black people in America.

The country is to vote on an amendment to the Constitution to allow the Trade.

The outcome? 70% of Americans vote for the amendment, so it passes.

The story ends with all blacks in this country, half-naked and in chains, being marched onto the starships of the Space Traders with armed white guards preventing any who would escape.

The story, something of a sensation, was included in a three-part HBO television anthology in 1994. That story was also part of a larger collection that he had written titled, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*.

The Permanence of Racism was both a theme and provocation to deeper confrontation with our nation’s history and current realities of race, and this mission of Professor Bell continued throughout his life.

His 1996 volume *Gospel Choirs: Psalms of Survival for an Alien Land Called Home*, as I noted in the readings, turned to the strength and faith embodied in Gospel music with each chapter having its own gospel anchor. Sixteen years later, his chapters on

- The growing economic extremes in our nation,
- criticism of Republicans’ assaults on the poor – [remember Newt Gingrich’s Contract with America?],
- staggering unemployment for minorities and youth,
- corporate greed,
• homophobic treatment of gays and lesbians in both white and black communities, and
• the media’s racist depiction of black males and of white fear and ignorance… all these remain familiar.

In his meditations, Derrick Bell ponders strategies of satire and resistance. Regarding conservative support for Americans’ right to have assault weapons, Derrick Bell proposed a television ad against proposed legislation repealing the ban on such weapons. One of his fictional characters suggests the following tactic:

Now, had I been in charge of the NAACP, I’d have arranged to hire three or four of the biggest, baddest-lookin’ black guys on the avenue. I’d have taken ‘em to a costume studio, got them rigged out in black pants and T-shirts with the words “Black Avengers” ‘cross the front. I’d have put big pistols in their belts and had some of ‘em carry rifles…. [You know AK-47, armor piercing assault arms]. Then I’d have made a commercial about these guys bein’ examples of hordes of young black men who are disgusted with this country – which is the God’s truth [with its ugly racism].

[In this infomercial], I’d say that men like these can hardly wait for the assault weapon ban to be lifted so they can arm themselves [as of course every citizen should]. and [have the option to] start avengin’ the wrongs done their people – which, if not true today, ‘ll be true soon enough. Get my point?

Derrick Bell’s satire aims at many targets as he underscores the need for creative strategies of “racial guile”… because the stakes are so high… “black people are dyin’.”

And… they are dying at the hands of police officers… still… in recent weeks…. 18-year-old Ramarley Graham chased into his home on February 2. For whatever the reasons… poor training, poor selection, carelessness, fear, and just maybe racism?

On issues of race, he invokes University of Michigan professor Harold Cruse who in 1967 wrote about “brain-washed white America” describing “this ‘nation of sheep’, this overfed, over-developed, over-privileged, (but culturally pauperized) federation of unassimilated European remnants” who need to be told “that their days of grace are numbered.”

As chilling as anything I have read is his invitation to consider American racism as a form of genocide. He chronicles race riots, lynchings, and deaths of black at the hands of whites for page after page. A sample includes:

• Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1834: 34 homes of blacks and two churches burned to the ground by whites on a rampage, leading to similar outbursts in Trenton, Rochester and New York City plus many others....
• New York City 1863: dozens of blacks beaten and killed; at least one stomped to death on West 32nd Street; tenements burned; a 3 year old child tossed from 4th story window....

• Memphis, Tennessee 1866: 46 blacks killed; ninety homes, twelve schools and four churches burned... described in The Nation magazine at the time as “inconceivably brutal”....

• Colfax, Louisiana 1872: 280 blacks killed, two whites…

• Atlanta, Georgia 1906 rioting and killings:

• East St. Louis riots in 1917: among “18 major interracial disturbances across the country....” Where 6000 blacks were driven from their homes... with soldiers joining the rioters.

• Chicago 1919… Elaine, Arkansas 1919....Tulsa riots of 1921, about which there has been some coverage in recent years.

• Rosewood, FL Massacre 1923, New York City 1935, Detroit 1943, Los Angeles 1965....

• 5000 recorded lynchings between 1859 and 1969 (128).?

His ten pages are just a summary of events described by two law students of his who were looking at the matter of genocide.

Scholar, professor, mentor, friend, troublemaker, theorist and activist… advocate of ethical ambition, of living with clarity and honor.... Derrick Bell was born in 1930 in Pittsburgh where he grew up, working class. His father was in the trash-hauling business.

After college at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, the first of his family to attend college, he served two years in the Air Force, returned home, became active with the NAACP, and graduated in 1957 from the University of Pittsburgh Law School, the only black student in his class.

Advancing Relationships

He and his wife Jewel Hairston had known each other in junior high school, but got reacquainted in Washington, D. C. and married in 1959. They raised three sons. She died of cancer in 1990, and Bell credits her as an integral partner in his work, just as his second wife Janet Dewart Bell was.

In addition to moral exemplars and models, Bell in Ethical Ambition identifies the role of caring, mutual relationships whether in marriage or committed relationships or friendships as supportive of living a life of integrity and honor, amidst the compromises that tempt us and bend us. Both Jewel Hairston Bell and Janet Dewart Bell receive loving praise and gratitude from him.

He worked for the Justice Department in the Civil Rights Division, but resigned in 1959 when he was told he could not continue to pay his $2 annual fee to be member of the NAACP because it was a conflict of interest. He then worked for the NAACP Legal
Defense and Education Fund in Mississippi, handling more than 300 desegregation cases.

In 1969 following a faculty position at the University of Southern California Law School, he was recruited by Harvard Law School, where in 1971 he became the first tenured black faculty member. He left Harvard in 1980 to become dean of the Oregon School of Law but resigned when the school failed to give tenure to a female Asian American candidate who was ranked next for the position.

He returned to Harvard Law School in 1986 until 1990 when he took a leave of absence to protest the lack of any tenured women of color on the faculty, and after two years’ absence was fired. He had become a visiting professor at NYU School of Law, a position he held at the time of his death.

We spoke and corresponded occasionally, and I cherish his inscriptions to me on several of his books.

**Courage and Risk-Taking**

In addition to ethical exemplars and relationships, Derrick Bell identifies courage and risk-taking as qualities of those ethically ambitious. Of many examples of individual and collective action, just one from his childhood, age 11. He speaks of a local bully nicknamed “Lucky”, who would often demand money from him – an older, bigger boy, who would receive a dime or a quarter of Derrick’s earnings from delivering newspapers. He lived in dread, and finally one afternoon he told the bully, “No!”

> “Lucky,” I told him as calmly as my shaking voice permitted, “I know you’re bigger than me, and you can fight better than I can, but I’m not giving you any more money. You’ll have to beat me first.” I didn’t strike a fighting pose – I didn’t have... one. Lucky gave me a long, quizzical look, then laughed and gave me a hard punch on the arm.

> “Hell, man, I don’t need your damn money.” He never hassled me again.8

Derrick Bell reports that he learned that in confronting his fears, he could move through them, and repeatedly, he did, and he made a difference.

**Evolving Faith**

Derrick Bell also speaks of his evolving faith and describes being an ethical Christian rather than embracing the ancient theologies. He also notes his appreciation for the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas that urges us, “Do not tell lies, and do not do what you hate.”9 Faith means holding on, even in hard times, to the light within, the passion within, the life energy within, which each of us has. To know one’s deepest self is to know God, he affirms in what he called his “Evolving Faith.”10
The Power in Passion

(1) Moral exemplars, (2) supportive relationships, (3) courage and risk-taking… and (4) reasoned faith and self-knowledge….

To these, Derrick Bell adds 2 other qualities, lived realities. He begins his book with the first… just mentioned… the matter of (5) Passion… Life-energy. The road to Passion is, as he rightly notes, unique for each of us…. And he encourages us to nurture it. It’s there, and he describes it this way: Passion, Life energy….

It thrives on substance: a job well done, giving credit to others, standing up for what you believe in, voluntarily returning lost valuables, choosing what feels right over what might feel good right now…. It’s finding power in doing the right things.¹¹

Humility’s Wisdom

One more “area of importance”, as he calls them, for him: (6) the Wisdom of Humility. He speaks from experience about the curse of self-righteousness of some social reformers; good intentions, hard work and discipline being insufficient; the dangers of stubbornness and an inability to change…. He recognizes that Humility’s wisdom accepts that there is health, wholeness, and meaning in the struggle itself.

One of the gospels that Derrick Bell includes in Gospel Choirs has a chorus:

I’m comin’ up – on the rough side – of the mountain
Just have to hold on….
I’m comin’ up – on the rough side – of the mountain
I’m doin’ my best to make it in. (Reverend F. C. Barnes)¹²

In speaking with a powerful character named Gwynn Gant, a black lesbian lawyer and activist in a relationship with a white woman who defends him in a particular controversy, Bell says, as he reaches his hand out to her:

You know the rough side is the only way you can climb a mountain.
On the smooth side, there are no footholds, nothing to grab on to. So, the hard way, the rough way, is the only way.¹³

Derrick Bell goes deep…. He speaks about living with an awareness of death and being prepared to die at any time helps him “in our hedonistic world” to heed the ongoing opportunities to “choose the good over the feels-good…. Not always, certainly not every second, but often enough to become a habit of life that nurtures rather than diminishes us.”¹⁴

Derrick Bell writes, “I’ll let you in on a little secret: Choosing the good and doing

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good feels good.”¹⁵

“... bears repeating: an ethical life is not a life of sacrifice. It is a life of riches.”¹⁶

Finally, even though we shall falter, or hesitate, or stumble at times,

“Through our choices day by day, we will be the success we aim for.”

¹ Ethical Ambition - Living a Life of Meaning and Worth, Derrick Bell, Bloomsbury, 2002, 178.
² Ethical Ambition, 127.
³ Ethical Ambition, 178.
⁴ Ethical Ambition, 15-16.
⁶ Gospel Choirs, 58.
⁷ Gospel Choirs, 118-128.
⁸ Ethical Ambition, 45.
⁹ Ethical Ambition, 91.
¹⁰ Ethical Ambition, 89.
¹¹ Ethical Ambition, 34-35.
¹² Gospel Choirs, 91.
¹³ Gospel Choirs, 102.
¹⁴ Ethical Ambition, 173-4.
¹⁵ Ethical Ambition, 58.
¹⁶ Ethical Ambition, 177.