



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord." I Timothy 1:2.

On a sabbatical sojourn that Jackie and I took a few years ago we both concentrated on our own particular interests. I was focused, not surprisingly, on issues of leadership and vision, reading many books and attending some workshops. Jackie, as a teacher, was creating curriculum on [Women in American History](#). Because our daughter was in graduate school at Yale Divinity School, we decided to spend most of our time in the northeastern part of the U.S.

We were like research scouts, scouring bookstores and libraries and museums wherever we found them. Eventually we found much information about such pioneers as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, Clara Barton, Rachel Carson, Sara and Angeline Grimke, Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Amelia Earhart, and Mother Mary Harris Jones. If you want fascinating reading, "Google" any of these and focus on their biographies.

At one point on our journey, when I was otherwise engaged, Jackie and our daughter, Deanna, decided to venture to see the Woman's Hall of Fame in the quaint little town of Seneca Falls, N.Y. Upwards to 200 women are featured. During the visit, our daughter, speaking out frustration, exclaimed, "How come, how come, having been the product of excellent education systems all the way through elementary and secondary school, all the way through college and now in graduate school, how come I have never heard of so many of these famous women? Why didn't anyone teach us about them? I feel cheated in my education." A point well made.

One other woman in the Hall of Fame that became a part of Jackie's study was a woman by the name of Rosa Parks. Parks, who died a couple of weeks ago at the age of 92, has been called by many the "mother of the civil rights movement." Thankfully many more people have heard of her today than was true a generation ago, or even when we had our sabbatical, but it took her death and funeral to remind us again how pivotal she was in our history. I would like to amplify a bit the significance of her incredible life.

Taylor Branch, in his highly acclaimed work, [Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963](#), exhibits one of the best accounts of the time for which Rosa Parks became known. I paraphrase his vivid description:

"School desegregation had just been outlawed in the famous Supreme Court decision of 1954 and much of the south was angry and more than a little paranoid. The powerful forces of segregation, led by such figures as Bull Connor, Orval Fabus, and George Wallace, had no intention of changing, of obeying the courts, and they would not let go of their way of life without a bitter fight." Tension and rebellion were in the air.

In Montgomery, Alabama, a rather small and undistinguished black church had just appointed a new pastor to its pulpit, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Before King had arrived in the city, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church had endured one controversy after another, two previous pastors had almost destroyed the church. Now the members were praying for a time of peace and tranquility. With the arrival of a new pastor with impeccable credentials, a PhD from Boston University in Systematic Theology, all were ready to move forward in a positive direction.

The newly ordained pastor also had no intention of leading a revolution; he wanted to devote his efforts to pastoring a church and growing the membership. His only other stated goal was to help reform the national Baptist church of which he was a part, as he thought the denomination had become antiquated and hierarchical.

But on December 1, 1955, an event happened which changed the course of history. It was just one person who struck the match for freedom and it spread like wildfire. (Sounds a bit like 1517 when the first Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the Wittenberg Door, and soon the document had spread throughout all of Europe.)

But in 1955 it was a woman named Rosa Parks, a humble, devout and pious Christian who was returning from a long day of working at a Montgomery department store. On the bus that day all 36 seats were filled, 22 African Americans in the back and 14 whites in the front. Everyone in those days had their place, both on the bus and in the world. Of course, only one race was sitting in first class.

When the bus stopped again, a white man got on and nobody exited. The driver then ordered four blacks to get up and go and stand in the back of the bus so that the one white man could sit down all by himself. That was the law in Alabama and in the entire south. All three black men complied, but Rosa Parks, tired after working all day, and tired of being treated as a second class citizen, refused to give up her seat.

The bus driver called for the police to come. They dragged Rosa Parks off of the bus, arrested her and put her in jail. This incident inflamed an already tense community. Within a couple of days all of the leaders of the Montgomery black community gathered together and agreed to begin a bus boycott. No African American would ride the bus again until they could sit anywhere they wished.

At the same time the black leaders made a truly history-making decision. Instead of choosing any of the long-time established leaders of the black community to lead the boycott, to be the face and voice of that protest, for reasons no one could quite figure

out (must have been a God thing), they chose the rookie pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

That same evening a rally took place which author Taylor Branch claims more than anything else launched the civil rights movement. The rally was called in support of the bus boycott, and it was held at the largest black Baptist church in Montgomery. A huge crowd gathered, filling every seat in the church and attracting several times as many people outside, listening to loudspeakers. Only one white person was in attendance at this historic event, a Lutheran pastor from a church just down the street.

After the many preliminaries and announcements about the specifics of the boycott, the relatively unknown 26-year-old King strode to the podium and began to speak. The words and power of his words truly changed the world forever.

"We are gathered here tonight for serious business," he began. "We are here because we are American citizens, and we have determined to apply for citizenship to the fullness of what it means. We are here because of the bus situation in Montgomery, but this situation is not new. The problem has existed for endless years.

Just the other day one of the finest citizens in Montgomery, Rosa Parks, was taken and carried to jail and arrested, only because she refused to give up her seat to a white person." The crowd started responding, *"Yes, yes, amen, amen."*

"I am happy," said King, "that it happened to a person like Rosa Parks, for nobody can doubt the boundless outreach of her integrity. Nobody can doubt the height of her character, no one can doubt the depth of her Christian commitment." The crowd started coming alive. *"And you know my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression."* Suddenly, without warning, a rising cheer took place and applause exploded beneath the cheer, all in the space of a second. Spontaneously the noise rolled on and on, like a wave that refused to break, and then a wall of sound came in from the enormous crowd listening outside.

Thunder seemed to be added, the sound of feet stomping on the wooden floor and the building shook and the roar refused to go away. One sentence had set it loose somewhere, and what took place was far beyond anything that King or anyone else had ever seen. The people decided, as Rosa Parks had decided, that they were sick and tired of being second class citizens.

Finally Dr. King spoke again, *"There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being thrown across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of a life's July and left standing amidst the piercing chill of an Alpine November."* The crowd drowned him out again. *"We are here," he said, "we are here because we are tired now."* The crowd had reached a feverish pitch.

"If we are wrong," he shouted, "if we are wrong, then the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong, then God Almighty is wrong. If we are wrong, then Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer and never came to this earth. If we are wrong, then justice is a lie." The crowd exploded again, wave upon wave of noise broke over them.

In conclusion, King quoted his favorite Old Testament passage, Amos 5:24, *"We are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."*

Dr. King recognized immediately how crucial it was that the "spark" of the civil rights movement be a person of unquestioned integrity. If there were any signs of dubious character, the overwhelming forces of segregation would have crushed her. Nobody could call her a Communist, a favorite way to defame people in the McCarthy era. Nobody could call her an "outside agitator," as George Wallace railed against. Nobody could call her any pejorative names at all, for she was such a humble, pious and devout Christian woman, who believed God was working through her. This gave her a power even beyond the government.

In remembering Rosa Parks this past week, many made the statement, "Rosa Parks sat down so that we might stand up." What a powerful legacy. "She sat down so that a whole race of people might stand up in dignity." In 1955 she infused the 50,000 African Americans in Montgomery with the will to walk instead of risk humiliation any longer on the busses. She became the catalyst for the movement which broke the back of legalized segregation in the U.S.

We still have *"miles to go before we sleep,"* to quote poet Robert Frost. In many ways, the races today are still systematically and tragically separated. But Rosa Parks gave birth to a movement that no one will ever be able to stop, the movement toward freedom and equality. Rosa Park's shattering act of defiance lives on even today. Praise God for such a woman of faith.