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**The Spiritual Center**

**Philippians 4:1**

This past week brought the death of one of the leaders of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Fred Shuttlesworth was a Baptist minister in Birmingham, Alabama who believed that the gospel transforms lives. The gospel of Christ was the spiritual center which enabled him to stand firm in the face of the many threats of violence made against him. He was repeatedly thrown in jail for his activities and on two occasions he was the target of bombs. On Christmas night in 1956 he survived an attack in which six sticks of dynamite were detonated outside his bedroom in the parsonage of the church as he lay in bed. One reporter described what happened next: “The wall and the floor were blown out and the mattress heaved into the air, supporting Shuttlesworth like a magic carpet (Diane McWhorter, New York Times, October 5, 2011).”

Shuttlesworth helped to organize the 1963 Birmingham protests and became one of its earliest casualties. When police commissioner Bull Conner ordered fire hoses turned on the protestors, Shuttlesworth was injured by a direct hit to the chest. When Conner was told of Shuttlesworth’s injury he said, “I’m sorry I missed it. I wish they’d carried him away in a hearse (New York Times, October 5, 2011)”. Shuttlesworth never backed down from the struggle for justice because he never gave up believing in the transforming power of the gospel.

This is the message that Matthew wanted to convey to his readers. In the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Matthew the gospel writer offers a parable which points to the profound difference the gospel can make in the lives of people like us. It is the story of a king who offers a wedding banquet for his son. But those who are invited refuse to come. The guest list is then discarded. The king decides to invite those who live on the margins of society. This strategy fills the banquet hall.

The story illustrates the rejection of the gospel by the religious people of Israel who were most likely to understand it. The gospel is accepted by the Gentiles who were least likely to grasp its meaning. Matthew’s readers have no problem with the story up to this point. But then comes a really bizarre twist. One of the guests who comes in at the last minute was not properly dressed. He does not have on a wedding garment so the king orders him to be ejected from the celebration and punished.

On the face of it this treatment of one who may not have had time to dress properly seems capricious and cruel. But it symbolizes what Matthew understands to be an urgent crisis in the church. To fail to wear the wedding garment is to accept the invitation of the gospel while refusing to be centered on the gospel. Those who would participate in the banquet of Jesus Christ must be willing to let the gospel change their lives. The wedding garment represents this process of transformation. Those who refuse to wear it are the ones who are unwilling to be changed.

Our stewardship campaign every year is a reminder of this truth that the gospel is at work in us whether we recognize it or not. When we make our pledges we acknowledge that the gospel has a claim on us. The transformation that God is bringing to our lives bears fruit in the way we use the time, talent, and treasure entrusted to us. Living generously is the natural result of a life centered on the gospel.

Paul was trying to encourage his people to practice this kind of stewardship in his letter to the Philippian church. In the fourth chapter Paul calls on the Philippians to “stand firm in the Lord (Philippians 4:1)”. The gospel of Jesus Christ is reshaping their lives. It is leading them to serve others in ways they never could have imagined a few years earlier. Paul is insistant that they should not back down from their calling. They should not be anxious about a hostile culture. They should not be distracted by conflict in the church. They should not be discouraged that they don’t have the resources to meet all the needs that are pressing in on them. Their only job is to stand firm in the Lord so that the gospel can continue to transform lives. If they are centered on the gospel, everything else will fall in place.

When Fred Shuttlesworth was injured in the first Birmingham march in the Spring of 1963, many of the marchers including Martin Luther King were thrown in jail. Bull Conner believed his repressive tactics had shut down the effort. But a follow up march was called to support the original 50 marchers who had been injured or incarcerated. On Easter Sunday about 5,000 people dressed in their Sunday best gathered to march. Because some of them had previously been on the receiving end of Bull Conner’s fire hoses and police dogs they knew what could happen. When the people saw that Conner and his officers had set up a barricade to prevent them from moving forward, they knelt in prayer. When the way was blocked they looked to their spiritual center. One eyewitness has described what happened next in these words:

All of a sudden, the Rev. Charles Billups, one of the most faithful and fearless leaders of the Birmingham movement, jumped up and hollered: “The Lord is with this movement! We going on to the jail! Off you knees!” And everybody in the front rows – they’d been praying now for about five minutes got up and started walking right toward the barricades and massed police. Stunned at first, Conner yelled, “Stop ’em, stop ’em.” But the police didn’t move a muscle...

They just stood there watching us as if they were transfixed. Even the police dogs that had been growling and straining at the leash when we first marched up became perfectly calm. The firemen just stood there holding the hoses. We walked right on them and Conner yelled, “Turn on the hoses, turn on the hoses!” But they didn’t move. I saw one fireman, literally with tears in his eyes, just let the fire hose drop to his feet. Our people marched right between the red fire trucks, singing “I want Jesus to walk with me.” Not rushing, just a very slow, serious march.

We marched on to the park across from the jail, where we reconvened to sing to the people in jail. I’ll never forget one old woman who got happy when she marched through the barricades. She shouted “Great God Almighty done parted the Red Sea one mo’ time!”

Conner stood there cussing and fussing. His policemen had refused to arrest us, his firemen had refused to hose us, his dogs had refused to bite us (Andrew Young).

Paul would not have been surprised by what happened in Birmingham that day. We should never underestimate the transforming power of the gospel by which we, too, can stand firm in the Lord.