

Montgomery County Office of Community Partnerships March 7, 2015

## REFLECTION ON THE RELEVANCE OF SELMA

I'm writing on the 50th Anniversary of Selma and recalling the pathos of that experience makes it feel like yesterday. I was living in the ghetto of Boston where four of us were developing a new model for theological education in the urban setting. I was trained and experienced in nonviolent protest to the point of being among those chosen to provide security for "Brother Martin." I was aware of the strategy of invoking and absorbing racist anger as a means of demonstrating both the problem and the solution. We were intentionally putting our lives on the line believing that the power of love was far greater than all forms of loveless power.

"Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, was no great surprise, but it was clearly a time of testing our inner resolve and the strength of the movement. President Johnson had asked Rev. King to select sites where racial segregation could be dramatically exposed leading Americans to understand and support civil rights legislation. Selma and the symbolic bridge named after a Confederate General and Grand Dragon for the KKK was an obvious choice.

We celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Selma knowing it awakened the conscience of America leading to the passage of the Voting Rights Act and changed the course of history. In fact it can be credited for making it possible to have an African-American President leading a procession with his family across that bridge today.

As I reflect on that time I'm all the more in awe of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who knowingly put his life on the line everyday and every night drawing kindred spirits such as the Rev. James Reed. Jim had left the prestigious All Souls Church in Washington to join us working in Roxbury. In response to "Bloody Sunday" he went to Selma where he was subsequently clubbed to death. His spirit and martyrdom remains a powerful motivating force for change.

My response to "Bloody Sunday" was to go to where the decisions were being made in Washington DC. I found a seat in the packed Church of the Reformation next to Dr. Robert McAfee Brown who was a renowned theologian from Stanford University. The place was full of professors, pastors, rabbis and executives of ecumenical and interfaith agencies from across the country.

We were organized to the point of having a delegation meeting with President Johnson and his staff who advised us on who in the Senate and House most needed our attention. I cannot imagine this happening today. The faith community is no longer organized for such engagement and far fewer of its

leaders are pursuing King's vision of the Beloved Community. Elected officials characteristically put special interests ahead of the common good to the point of shutting down the government and not participating in the symbolic march today.

When President Johnson and his fellow Democrats, particularly from the South, decided to pass civil rights legislation they knew they were sacrificing their dominant position. They did it because they believed in the moral integrity of Rev. King predicated on scripture, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. They knew it was the right and best thing for their children, America and the world. As we celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Selma, let us not only acknowledge the spiritual and political dynamics that made it a marker event but let us also seek to replicate it.

Today voting rights are being targeted with more subversive mechanisms than before Selma. The Justice Department's report on the police department in Ferguson demonstrates that we do not live in a post-racial America. Far from it, and Ferguson is a parable for the nation. The growing economic and social inequities contribute significantly to more Americans being incarcerated than in any other developed country, and the great majority of them are poor and black.

The litany of issues deserving our engagement could go on, but for that to happen we need to catch the spirit of Selma. We need to see the bridge as sacred space and be willing to sacrifice for the sake of establishing "liberty and justice for all."

I think, for example, that what Selma did for voting rights, Ferguson can do for reforming our criminal justice system. I pray President Obama will be inspired today to use his remaining years advancing the legacy of Selma for the benefit of all races, minorities, genders, religions, sexual orientations, and social classes.

As I reflect back over 50 years I'm deeply grateful for the companions on the journey, the progress achieved through willing sacrifice and the opportunities at hand in Montgomery County. I feel blessed to be serving as the Interfaith Community Liaison knowing the County Executive and County Council are fully committed to social justice. I'm honored to be working with colleagues committed to making our majority-minority county the most welcoming in America. Here faith leaders from Eastern and Western faith traditions are intentionally creating the Beloved Community that is a place where basic human needs and rights are met.

Here faith leaders are on call 24/7 responding to any act of hate or violence. Here we are developing an interfaith calendar to be used within the public school system and throughout the county honoring the holidays for all faith

communities. Here we are certifying faith leaders to work with the Office of Emergency Preparedness and Homeland Security, Police, Fire and Rescue, Health and Human Services and the Red Cross responding to all forms of emergencies. Here our Faith Community Working Group is holding a Town Hall on March 16 with the Chief Tom Manger to discuss community policing and the "Montgomery County Model" that is being promoted for police departments across the country. And so much more could be added.

On the national scene, we may lack the kind of leadership within the faith community and government that passed civil rights legislation 50 years ago. On the local scenes, I want to believe consciences are being awakened and change will come.

I thank God this is the case for us, and I look forward to working with you in keeping the dream of "Brother Martin," the spirit of Selma and the hope of everyone alive. **Message Headline** By breaking up the body of the letter into logical topics, your readers can focus in on the topic that they deem most relevant. Select your wording carefully. Most people scan their emails very quickly. Keep your paragraphs to seven lines or less. If you have more information, include a link to your website where your readers can get further details. Thank your customer, tell them how valuable they are to you, but don't go overboard. Insincerity is easy to spot.

Sincerely, Faith Community Working Group Montgomery County Office of Community Partnerships.