

Personal History and the Civil Rights Act of 1964  
December 10, 2014

Thanks Dr. Rigsby, my friend and fellow Mississippian, for that introduction. To the Honorable Mayor Madeline Rogero, Chair Joshalyn Hundley, Rev. Renee Kesler and members of the steering committee, thanks for inviting me to take part in your year-long celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Thanks to all of you for coming. I want to acknowledge the presence of so many friends and especially that special life partner, my wife, Dr. Carolyn R. Hodges, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School at the University of Tennessee.

It is indeed fitting that we culminate the 50<sup>th</sup> year celebration on this specific day—because it was December 10, 1964 that Dr. Martin Luther King accepted the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the Civil Rights Movement which was largely responsible for passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But while we culminate our celebration we commence or recommence our efforts to make this a just society for all.

On July 2, 1964, in the presence of members of Congress and notable civil rights leaders, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This act was the culmination of work by Martin Luther King and President John F. Kennedy and countless others who labored long and hard to bring dignity and hope to those who had been proclaimed free over a century before. In his “I Have a Dream” speech, King said that blacks had been given a blank check that had been returned “insufficient funds.” Earlier, John F. Kennedy noted in his civil rights address on June 11, 1963 that though Lincoln had freed the slaves their heirs, their

grandsons, were not yet freed from social and economic oppression. “And this Nation, for all its hopes and all its boasts, will not be free until all its citizens are free.”

This Act barred unequal application of voter registration requirements, ended segregation in public places, and banned discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. Johnson himself proclaimed it to be a bill of historic importance that “is a challenge to all of us to go to work in our communities, in our states, in our homes and in our hearts to eliminate the last vestiges of injustice in our beloved country. . . . I urge every American to join in this effort to bring justice and hope to all our people and to bring peace to our land.”

While blacks throughout the South and nation had suffered from repressive laws meant to abridge their rights and privileges, none suffered more than the citizens of my home state of Mississippi. Mississippi had a long history of Jim Crow laws and repressive measures that were meant to relegate blacks to second class citizenship and to deny them basic human rights. After the unanimous decision in the landmark 1954 Brown case which declared segregation in public schools illegal, Mississippi (and other states) sought ways to get around the law—legal and otherwise. It established the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, erected private academies, and did everything possible to keep black and white children from attending school together. I never attended an integrated school, but the real tragedy is that even today in the Mississippi Delta, blacks and whites still do not attend school together.

So as a child growing up in the Delta, I was aware of this system of American apartheid and saw family and friends suffer and some die under its heavy weight. I was 11 years old when Reverend George W. Lee of Belzoni was killed in May, 1955, because of his work in Civil Rights. Rev. Lee, not only spoke of the rewards and blessings of the afterlife but encouraged his

congregation to enjoy the blessings of this world as well. Rev. Lee is considered the first martyr of the Civil Rights Movement.

Later in August 1955, we learn of Emmett Till's tragic murder in Money, MS—just about 10 miles from my doorsteps in Greenwood. The fourteen year-old Chicagoan allegedly flirted with a white woman and paid the supreme price for his indiscretion. An all-white male jury found Till's murderers innocent. The verdict was quite predictable for a state that had never found a white person guilty of murdering blacks. Bryant and Milam's attorneys made their appeal to their southern white brothers on the jury, stating that their forefathers would roll over in their graves if these men were found guilty. This gruesome murder and verdict served as a catalyst for the Civil Rights movement.

Medgar Evers, the Field Secretary of the NAACP, whom I knew because of his efforts to establish Youth Chapters throughout the state, was murdered because of his activism for voting rights and his boycotts of businesses that discriminated against blacks. After serving his country in World War II, Medgar Evers found his path to the polls blocked by a gang of white hoodlums. "We fought during the war for America, and Mississippi was included. Now after the Germans and Japanese had not killed us, it looked as though the white Mississippians would." He concluded: "I was born in Decatur, was raised there, but I never in my life was permitted to vote there."

Then there was Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville, MS who attempted to register to vote in 1962 in Sunflower County and later challenged the seating of an-all white delegation at the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. Fannie Lou Hamer paid dearly for her activism. She was beaten on several occasions, lost her job on a plantation in Ruleville, and served time in Parchman Penitentiary. My friend Silas McGhee, a fellow child soldier, was shot point-

blank in the head outside a black restaurant in Greenwood. Since he was denied treatment locally, he had to be taken just over 100 miles to Jackson to be treated. It was a miracle, the grace of God, that the bullet missed the brain or some other vital organ.

These personal stories at once point to the harassment and brutality blacks suffered almost daily and to the urgent need to pass some legislation that would protect them from the abuses afflicted on them by fellow citizens. Discrimination still exists in our society. We are reminded of this daily. The election and re-election of the first African-American president did not bring about the millennium in terms of rights and privileges for all citizens. But I am not one who would argue that no progress has been made since Johnson signed the historic bill in 1964. Those cynical individuals who argue that things are not better since the passage of the legislation, never experienced or have forgotten the indignity of having to use facilities that said "For Colored Only," or of having to purchase food to go from an outside window, or of having to make special hotel arrangements because you could not stay at the same hotel as your fellow white military draftees, or even more tragically of not being able to receive life-saving services at the public hospital, paid in part by your own tax dollars. I know the pain of discrimination and segregation individuals suffered before the passage of the Act. No doubt things are better now!

But we are a long way from the Beloved Community that King envisioned and so eloquently spoke about during the early years of his career. We have failed to observe some clear and plain lessons that were taught to us in Sabbath School or Kindergarten. (Don't bite, kick, scream.) The main one being: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. In fact, the various articles of the Civil Rights Act, despite any legal jargon, only ask of us to respect

and treat our neighbor as we want to be treated. We are the ones who complicate matters when we fail to treat others as we expect to be treated. Johnson in signing the bill noted that “it restricts no one’s freedom as long as he respects the rights of others.” Kennedy, in the civil rights speech I referred to earlier, gave statistics showing that African-Americans fall behind their white counterparts in every meaningful statistical category. So he asks simply “Who among us would change places with him?” Within minutes after this speech, Medgar Evers was killed in his driveway in Jackson, MS. Near the end of his career, King too began to question just how much could be achieved based on moral suasion alone.

Perhaps, we seek to deny others their rights and privileges because we fail to see them as our neighbor or even as human. What a difference it would make if the next time I draw my gun at that lurking monster I recognize instead the image of a fellow human being-- perhaps even that of my own son.

I have been asked to suggest where we might go from here. In so doing let me begin with the words of Frederick Douglass: “Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. . . . This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” We must be willing to back up our pleas for decency and respect by concrete actions. The kind of agitation that was necessary to get the bill passed in the first place is necessary to protect it from further erosion of its key sections. In this regard, the Civil Rights Act must be constantly monitored and where necessary strengthened and/or tweaked to make sure it continues to meet the purposes for which it was originally designed. Reactionary opponents of progressive legislation will search for ways to undermine its effectiveness.

Such indeed was the case with Title I of the Bill which deals with Voting. The language in the original Bill did not outlaw poll taxes and literacy tests—chief stumbling blocks to blacks voting in the South. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was meant to strengthen the 1964 Bill. The right to vote is the most basic and precious of our rights as citizens. We should vote ourselves in every election and encourage others to do the same, and we must fight to protect the franchise in future generations for every American citizen.

Furthermore, we need to create more opportunities for citizens to come together to discuss in an open and forthright way all those biases, prejudices, and stereotypes that stand in our way of our recognizing our neighbor as our brother or sister. Meaningful community dialogue is necessary on a regular basis. King was right when he said that we are so bound up in a network of mutuality that what affects one affects the other. When we see or hear of injustice in speech or action against anyone, we should speak out in peaceful protests and/or demonstrations, not as black or white citizens-- but as citizens. One of the positive things to come out of the recent incidents in New York, Ferguson, and Cleveland was the multi-racial chorus of voices that joined together in protest.

Despite criticism from some other leaders, King never gave up on using the technique of non-violence to fight injustice in our society. But around 1967 and '68, he began talking about a vigorous, even militant type of nonviolence. So we can all join with King and the prophet Amos in our plea: "Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."

John O. Hodges