

## "Eyes on the Prize"

Rev. Peter Bynum

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*<sup>54</sup>When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. <sup>55</sup>But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup>"Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" <sup>57</sup>But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. <sup>58</sup>Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup>While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup>Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died. (Acts 7:54-60)*

Fifty-six years ago to this very day, on May 14, 1961, two busses left Atlanta bound for Birmingham, Alabama. One was a Trailways, the other a Greyhound. In addition to their normal commercial passengers, each bus carried six people on a mission -- whites and African Americans who had bought a ticket for the express purpose of challenging the Jim Crow policies of the South. It was Mother's Day, and the Freedom Riders were headed into the state of Alabama for the first time.<sup>1</sup>

When the Greyhound bus pulled into the station in the city of Anniston, an angry mob surrounded the bus. They yelled angry slurs, broke windows with crowbars, and punctured the tires. Somehow, the driver made his way slowly through the crowd and managed to get out of the station, but the crowd followed them. A car swerved back and forth in front of the bus to slow it down, and soon the riders heard the sickening, flapping sound of the tires going completely flat. When the white driver got out and saw that the tires were hopeless, he just walked away. It was then that the back window of the bus was smashed open, and the riders heard the angry cries from the crowd: "Where is the gas?! Throw it in! Throw it in!"<sup>2</sup> When the firebomb exploded in the bus, the crowd outside barricaded the doors. Smoke and fire filled the inside of the bus. It was only when the fuel tank exploded, and the crowd dispersed, that the dizzy, coughing and half-dead passengers were able to spill out onto the roadside. Even then, in their dazed condition, some of the riders were beaten with baseball bats as they ran from the fire.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the passengers on the second bus, the Trailways bus, were completely unaware of what had happened in Anniston. When they arrived in Birmingham, they were met by a much larger mob of Klansmen wielding iron pipes, sticks, bats, guns, bicycle chains.<sup>4</sup> James Peck, a white man, was the first one off the bus. Reporters say that he called out to the crowd, "No people, don't do it! They are my brothers... they're your brothers! Before I let you kill them you'll have to kill me first."

<sup>1</sup> "Eyes On The Prize - (Part 3) Ain't Scared of Your Jails 1960-1961," PBS, 1987, [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

<sup>2</sup> Transcript of "Freedom Riders," PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/freedomriders/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-freedom-riders-then-and-now-45351758/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/freedom-rides-1961>



70 Union Street North

Concord, NC 28025

(704) 788-2100

[info@firstpresconcord.org](mailto:info@firstpresconcord.org)

To which a Klan spokesman coldly replied, “That ain't no problem.” On that cue, the crowd descended upon the bus. It was total carnage. The brutal beatings took place on the bus, in the terminal.

Miraculously, the riders never hit back. Most, if not all, of these first riders were veterans of workshops led by the Reverend James Lawson. Leaders like John Lewis and Diane Nash were among the trainees who were taught the tactics of non-violence, the virtues of non-retaliation, and the philosophies of Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>5</sup> While Lawson’s workshops were very practical, the core of his teaching was always theological. The foundational principle was the idea that love and forgiveness are more powerful than hate... that if God’s oppressed people were to overcome the vitriol of division and prejudice, they would have to do so as true disciples of the Savior who calls us to love one another as he has loved us. And that meant that, no matter how savagely they were beaten, the Freedom Riders would not hit back.

These strategies have a heritage as old as the church. When Stephen called out the Jewish leadership, calling them “stiff-necked people” and “betrayers” who were ignoring the prophets and offending God, our translation said that the crowd “*became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen.*” This is one of those times when I prefer the contemporary language of Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible, *The Message*. Peterson translates the verse this way: “*At that point they went wild, a rioting mob of catcalls and whistles and invective*” (Acts 7:54, *The Message*). However, as the danger around him mounted, Stephen looks beyond the mob of hate and violence surrounding him. His eyes become fixed on heaven, on a vision of Christ which fills him with joy and peace. As the stones begin to hit him, still he does not resort to retaliation or hatred. Instead, his final words are words of love and forgiveness that mirror those of Jesus on the cross. Kneeling to pray under the hailstorm of rocks, he utters, “*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*”

I don’t know about you, but the inspiration of this event tends to get overwhelmed by something else in my spirit. Yes, it is inspiring to see a witness this strong, this impervious to pain, this committed to seeing a task through no matter what. But the more dominant voice in my spirit is a question: Would you do this? Could you do this? Would I, could I, resist the temptation to hit back, when people are yelling at me, blaming me, throwing rocks at me, and wanting me to die? I hope the answer is yes. I want the answer to be yes. But I honestly don’t know.

On Monday morning, the day after Mother’s Day in 1961, the front pages of the world’s newspapers were filled with images of angry mobs wishing people dead – wanting them to die because of where they wanted to sit in a bus station, or which restroom or water fountain they used. These mobs were not just armed with rocks, but with bats, chains, guns and firebombs. Still, for those committed to the way of non-violence, the violence in Alabama was simply a call to even more courageous action. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) of Nashville, Tennessee, knew that the Freedom Rides could not stop now. If they did, the message would be sent that violence, if it was strong and hateful enough, could turn back and ultimately defeat the cause of justice and equality. That week, white and black college students in Nashville, led by Diane Nash,

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<sup>5</sup> <https://snccdigital.org/people/james-lawson/>

called their parents, signed last wills and testaments, and boarded a bus bound for Birmingham.<sup>6</sup>

Eventually, there would be over 430 Freedom Riders. They would voluntarily accept beatings, imprisonments and unmentionable humiliations in their work of non-violent resistance. Looking back years later, Diane Nash realized how critical Reverend Lawson's workshops and training had been. It was there, she said, that "I discovered [the] practical and real power of truth and love."<sup>7</sup> John Lewis, now a congressman from Georgia said that the Freedom Riders were forever marked and changed by their experience. "We had moments there," he said, "to learn, to teach each other the way of nonviolence, the way of love, the way of peace."<sup>8</sup> They became victors in this struggle simply because they kept their eyes fixed on a vision of a better way – a way marked not by violence or hatred, but by a love that overcomes hate and a light that overcomes darkness.

One of the songs that inspired the Freedom Riders was adapted from an older spiritual about keeping our hands on the gospel plow. It was updated and adapted to the struggle that emerged on the highways and in the bus stations of the South...

*Paul and Silas bound in jail,  
Had no money for their bail  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.  
Paul and Silas thought they was lost,  
Dungeon shook and the chains come off,  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.  
Freedom's name is mighty sweet,  
And soon we're gonna meet  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on...  
I'm gonna board that big Greyhound,  
Carry the love from town to town,  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.*<sup>9</sup>

It would be easy for us to dismiss disciples like Stephen, or James Peck, Diane Nash, John Lewis or any other Freedom Rider as idealists. But we cannot dismiss them that way, because they backed up their ideals with tangible action. They paid a very real price for what they believed. And the results were also very real. Stephen showed every follower of Jesus – including Paul, who held the clothes of those who threw the stones – the kind of commitment that true faith requires. The Freedom Riders proved to a generation that love and forgiveness really are more powerful than hate and violent retaliation.

Perhaps that just leaves us to wonder what we would have done. We can wonder if we have the courage of Stephen to speak truth to power even when it is dangerous to do so. We can wonder whether we would have had the commitment to leave school in the middle of final exams to board a bus bound for a mob. We can wonder whether we would have the

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/freedom-rides-1961>

<sup>7</sup> <https://snccdigital.org/people/james-lawson/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/freedomriders/>

<sup>9</sup> Lyrics to "Eyes on the Prize," found at <http://springsteenlyrics.com/lyrics/e/eyesontheprize.php>, on October 10, 2011.

strength to resist the temptation to lash out and hit back when hatred lunges at us with lead pipe in hand.

I read this story, and I think about what happened 56 years ago today, and I don't know if I have that kind of faith in me. But I know I want it. I know it is not easy for me to respond to hatred with love. I know it is difficult for me to meet threats with peace. But I know that I am called to be that kind of disciple, and I know I want to be that kind of disciple. And I think you do, too. I think you want that also.

Like it or not, that is the path we have chosen to walk – a Way that always puts love first, that is always ready to forgive, that always resists the temptation to hit back.

May God give us that kind of courage, that kind of faith, that fixes our gaze solely upon Jesus, even when the blows are raining down.

Lord, keep our Eyes on the Prize, and help us hold on. Amen.