

# THIRD STREET BETHEL A.M.E. SOCIAL ACTION NEWSLETTER

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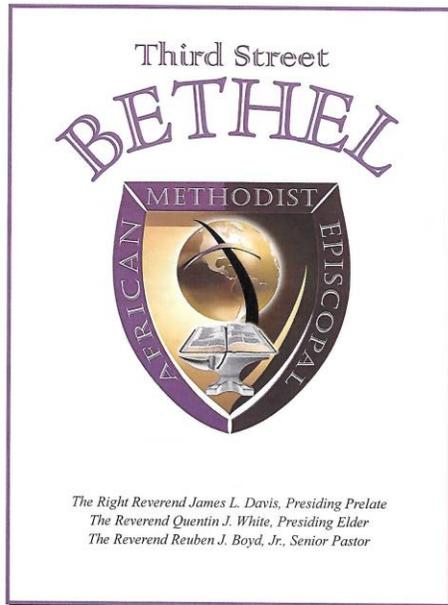
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## God Demands Us to Create Justice

Ravi K. Perry, Ph.D.



What do we want, what do we want, what do we want? That's been the question we, who are Black, marginalized, "the other," have asked ourselves since the very beginning. Well before somebody named Columbus claimed ownership of a land he called anew, Blacks were the first to cry for what we wanted no matter where our travels led us. These black people did not let assumptions of what a black person was to be define their destiny. They demand free settlement, they demand rightful ownership, they demand to be set free. Here in the United States, black men and women from Africa were present long before these people called Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. Blacks like Anthony Johnson, the patriarch of the first community of Negro property owners who were settled in Virginia in the early 1600s on the banks of the Pungo-teague River. Before this concept we know now as chattel slavery came into existence, we had black led rebellions – again, black people crying loud and clear what they wanted! Some arrived as early as 1526 in a small town in what is now South Carolina near the Pedee River – and they, too, rebelled. Most of us know the date of 1619. We were told in our elementary history books that was the earliest possible examples of what black people could possibly want could not have existed until then. It was 1619 when slaves first arrived here on our eastern shores. Well, that's what we were told. We weren't also told that it was 1619 when the first recorded example of representative government was also formed as the Virginia Company of London granted the few white "colonists" who were there the right to be freely elected by other inhabitants of the Virginia soil, developing what would become the House of Burgesses. But history books begin a month later when a Dutch vessel carrying twenty "Negroes" arrived at a place called Jamestown. Why they came, we still don't know. But we do know that white "colonists" attempts to use Native American labor for their agricultural development was unsuccessful and resulted in wars the colonists lost as early as 1622. As Native American free labor gave way to white indentured servitude and African slavery, the society developed more laws and more edicts that enshrined slavery into our early white "colonists" mindsets, leading one minister to proclaim in 1757 that "to live in Virginia without slaves is morally impossible."

Despite the tenor of the nation as an enforcer of evil and a promoter of injustice, blacks knew what they wanted. We resisted bondage. We fought against shackles. We redefined what was to be considered moral. And so began the era of abolition that led to the slow emancipation of black people by the reluctant Lincoln only after being forced by the cadre of abolitionist movement heroes and sheroes from decades before. A plan to colonize us, became a proclamation to free us. A plan to send us back to Africa became an amendment to the Constitution granting us citizenship and equal

protection. A plan to let the slavery question solve itself became a plan to give black men the right to vote and all blacks the rights to federal protection in the form of troops, economic assistance in the presence of a bureau, and political rights in the image of leaders such as Blanche Bruce, John Mercer Langston, Hiram Revels and others.

In speaking to a New England audience, escaped slave, a man with a bounty on his head, freedom chaser, Frederick Douglass dared explain what is it that blacks want. And he dared to tell the white audience why. He said, “We may be asked, I say, why we want it. I will tell you why we want it. We want it because it is our right, first of all. No class of men, can, without insulting their own nature, be content with any deprivation of their rights. We want it again as a means for educating our race.”

Today, many still misinterpret the phrase, civil rights. Civil rights are not just black people’s rights. Civil rights in the American context are rights to personal liberty, especially as applied to an individual or a minority group. These rights are established by the 13<sup>th</sup>. And 14<sup>th</sup>. Amendments of the U.S. Constitution and certain Congressional acts. If we limit the conception of civil rights to blacks then that also limits the opportunities for young people to affect change for, engage in, and advocate on behalf of the new generation of civil rights, today.

For Dr. King, the person whom most consider the leader of the civil rights movement, he made it clear, that the movement’s purpose was not just civil rights for blacks, but about human rights for everybody. As he stated in the speech The Great March on Detroit in June 1963: “God is not merely interested in the freedom of black men and brown men and yellow men. God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race.”

**History books in primary and secondary classrooms would tell you that middle-aged Black Americans led the civil rights charge. Those textbooks omit that King began his dream at age 26 in 1955. You may be surprised to know that many** unsung heroes of the movement have in fact been high school and college students. We know of the young Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who became the spokesperson for the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, because of E.D. Nixon. His selection of a young person named King to lead a boycott because of King’s new resident status shines light on not only the role of young people in the movement, but the role that recent and temporary transplants to a city such as college students today – the role, they too can play in advocating for the rights of others.

Without Nixon’s insurgence, the nation would not know Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King, Jr and the movement’s beginnings would have been written so drastically different. It was Nixon who helped bail Parks out of jail and solicited the help of white liberal lawyers when she landed in jail. It was E. D. Nixon who called Martin Luther King, Jr. to ask whether or not the first boycott meetings might be held at his church.

Appointed by Nixon, King was not alone in his leadership of the civil rights movement. A close friend of King’s and also a pastor in Montgomery in 1955, Ralph Abernathy was 29 when he joined King in the boycott. Ernest Green, Melba Patillo Beals, Thelma Mothershed Wair, Elizabeth Eckford and four others were each under the age of seventeen when they integrated Little Rock’s Central High School in 1957. During November and December, 1959, Nashville students John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Marion Barry, and others bought goods and then attempted to desegregate the lunch counters at Harvey’s and Cain-Sloan’s department stores. In February 1960, four freshmen at Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina, -- Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair, Jr. (later known as Jibreel Khazan), and David Richmond, all members of the NAACP Youth Council, sat down at the whites-only lunch counter inside the Woolworth’s store in Greensboro, North Carolina and ordered coffee, launching what many have called the official beginning of the movement. In 1964 the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the NAACP organized its Freedom Summer campaign and focused in on Mississippi in an effort to end the political disenfranchisement of African Americans in the state given that in 1962 only 6.7 per cent of African Americans in the state were registered to vote, at the time, the lowest percentage in the country. CORE, SNCC and NAACP also established 30 Freedom Schools in towns throughout Mississippi. The Freedom Schools and their supporters were often targets of white mobs. On June 21, 1964 James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, went to Longdale, MS to visit Mt. Zion Methodist Church, a building that

had been fire-bombed by the Ku Klux Klan because it was going to be used as a Freedom School. On the way back to the CORE office in Meridian, the three men were arrested and released only to be stopped again on a rural road where a white mob shot killed and buried them. They were 21, 20 and 24 when they were killed fighting for the right for all of us to vote.

And so, the question: what do we want, what do we want, what do we want, is answered - we want all of our rights, we want them here and we want them now. And, might I add, we want them with your help! As Douglass says in 1865, "I ask, my friends, who are apologizing for not insisting upon this right; where can the black man look, in this country, for the assertion of his right, if he may not look to the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society.?" And I'd pose the same question today for the AME church and its role in social action. If all blacks – and the struggle of all peoples - are not fully embraced in the AME church, then what is our purpose?

Isaiah admonishes us to focus not on material things, to focus not on worldly possessions, to focus not on our contrive matters of our daily misfortune – but, for Isaiah we must ask ourselves is our offering, is our relationship, is our commitment, is our standing in this nation, is our place in this world, of selfishness, of wickedness – or are we keeping ye judgment and doing justice. For Isaiah bluntly reminds us to do just that. Isaiah 56:1: keep ye judgement and do justice. What does it mean, though, to do justice? Justice is an action. Justice requires of us something. To move. To do. To act. And our reward is promised to be great in heaven if we do this – this thing called justice. For "blessed is the man that doeth this", so says Isaiah in 56:2.

Justice is a commandment. The Lord God has anointed Isaiah to share with us how to free each other and to remove the shackles of oppression. And, it was Jesus who 700 plus years after Isaiah, was tempted by the devil in the wilderness for forty days. And as he returned to Galilee and to Nazareth, his home town, he shares on the Sabbath in the synagogue that passage: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel of the poor, he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised." Jesus handed the book of Isaiah to the minister of the synagogue, sat down, and then said, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears."

Here today, we know what it means to do justice. For Jesus, in fulfilling the prophet Isaiah's vision, places justice, liberty, and freedom at the core of our faith! This God, my God, my Jesus came here to speak for those who have been left out. Left out of the words "we the people" in our Constitution. Left out of the group of people truly eligible to pursue the words of our Declaration of Independence – "life, liberty, and the pursuit if happiness." Left out of courtroom proceedings like the Dred Scott decision from 1857 where in the Supreme Court said that the black man was not even a citizen, did not have the right to sue, and has no rights a white man is bound to respect."

Jesus came to speak for those of us left out, to lift us out of bondage. Thus, for us today, by voting, by exercising the most precious gift to "do justice" we can help ensure that our nation who strives to have "equal justice under the law" can effectively ensure that happens.

Recall that it was in chapter 58 that Isaiah asks us to ask ourselves – to look in the mirror and think about our fast, think about our commitment to ourselves, think about our relationship with each other, ponder, for just a moment, Isaiah, asks of us, to ponder, is our fast not to let the oppressed go free? Is the purpose of our fast not to feed the hungry, clothe the naked?

For we, did not first "do justice" when we had the chance. And the ugly result we now know.

But, we yet have that chance to break free. By every vote we cast. By every public meeting we attend. By every representative we call, we can break free. *Dred Scott* is no more. It was replaced by the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment. *Plessy v. Ferguson* has fallen. It was beaten by *Brown v. Board*. Jim Crow has left. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 ensured that. Poll taxes have surrendered to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Firehoses have receded. Billy clubs have lost their sting. All

because we have voted. We've voted with our feet. We've voted with our hearts. We've voted with our blood. And we mustn't stop hearing the call for justice now. The movement is not yet over. The battle is not yet won.

We may be troubled by the police, troubled by poverty, troubled by homelessness, troubled by back bills, troubled by failing health, troubled by temptations galore, yet we are not distressed, we are perplexed, but not in despair. Those of us who are oppressed. Those who are broken. Those who are dispirited. Let us do justice. Let us vote justice. Let us participate in our society's governing bodies – to do justice. Let us do justice! Let us do justice!

Dubbed “an institution... a social center of astonishing efficiency, where the poor and ostracized met in human sympathy, mutual charity and encouragement, to fight the battle of life” by W.E.B. DuBois, the AME Church has long sought to advance the freedom of others through Christian witness. That tradition must continue.

## OUR MILLENNIAL STANDOUT: Sydney Jenkins

### Teach For America



In the United States, the circumstances children are born into predict the opportunities they will have in life. Our education system was not designed to enable all children to realize their potential or achieve their goals.

Teach for America finds outstanding leaders who commit to expanding educational opportunity, beginning with at least two year teaching in an under-resourced public school.

Our very own Sydney Jenkins is one of those teachers to join Teach For America in South Carolina.

She is a recent graduate of Hampton University with a degree in Political Science. Sydney is the daughter of Joseph and Charmagyne Jenkins, the sister of Maya Jenkins and the granddaughter of Maxine Jenkins.

Sydney says, “Growing up in a community where access to a quality education was very segregated and inequitable has been the starting force in pushing me to join Teach For America. I saw many of my peers lack access to scholastic and post-graduate opportunities because of improper school funding, aided by systemic racism and oppression. Joining TFA was a way for me to join a collective of people who are building on the backs of so many trailblazers that came before us, in pursuit of a country where students – regardless of their socioeconomic background – are able to thrive in education. I am ecstatic to begin my work.” #tfa2019.

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