

Listening to the Voice of God

During World War II the Army published a weekly magazine called *Yank*. It became the most widely read military publication in U.S. history. *Yank* had the usual cheeky content to entertain the GIs in combat, including comic strips, articles on movie stars, and even full page pin-up girls – something that would never be allowed today!

But the editors of *Yank* also had the courage to print some very challenging articles, one of which was published in April 1944. It was actually a letter from Corporal Rupert Trimmingham, an immigrant born in Trinidad, about his disheartening experience of being a black soldier barred from a restaurant at a southern railway station because the “Old Jim Crow rules” would not allow blacks to eat at the same lunch counter with whites.

In the case of Corporal Trimmingham and several other black soldiers, they had to go into the kitchen to eat their lunch. That was degrading enough – someone who was serving in the military and was prepared to die for his country being relegated to the kitchen to eat his lunch simply because of the color of his skin.

But what was worse, as Corporal Trimmingham wrote, was that at “11:30 A.M. about two dozen German prisoners of war, with two American guards, came to the station. They entered the lunchroom, sat at the tables, and had their meals served, talked, smoked, in fact had quite a swell time.”

Corporal Trinningham goes on to write, “I stood on the outside looking on, and I could not help but ask myself these questions: Are they not taught to hate and destroy... all democratic governments? Are we not American soldiers, sworn to fight for and die if need be for this our country? Then why are they treated better than we are? Why are we pushed around like cattle? If we are fighting for the same thing, if we are to die for our country, then why does the Government allow such things to go on? Some of the boys are saying that you will not print this letter. I’m saying that you will.” (1)

It took a black immigrant from Trinidad to write that powerful letter – a letter which got more reaction than any other letter published by *Yank*, almost all of which was supportive. The letter contributed to a growing movement to integrate the Armed Forces, and finally on July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman issued an Executive Order that there should be “equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin.”

Something happened in post-World War II America. Americans began to see that racism and segregation, whether in the military or in the country at large, were wrong. For some people, it was as if they were hearing the voice of God telling them that racism and segregation could no longer be tolerated, that the time has come to end it, and that God’s will was for the nation was for black and white to come together as one people.

Let me ask you: Have you ever heard the voice of God speaking to you? That something was right or wrong, and that you needed to speak out? That the circumstances you had always accepted could no longer be tolerated? That the time was right for people of good will to stand up for justice even at the cost of their own safety?

I suspect that is what is happening right now in the cities all over Iran as protesters rail against an authoritarian regime. And that is what happened in the 1950s and 60s when people came together to support civil rights. Whatever the nation had tolerated could no longer be tolerated. Injustice had to be opposed.

Tomorrow the nation honors Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. But before Martin Luther King, Jr. there was Rosa Parks. She is the one often credited with beginning the modern-day civil rights movement by her refusal to give up her seat to a white man and go sit in the back of the bus. The law in Alabama was very clear: the separation of the races was required in buses, restaurants, schools and public accommodations. Rosa Parks fought against those laws as an active member of the NAACP, and as far back as 1943 she had refused to follow the rules requiring black people to enter city buses through the back door. In the late 1940s she formed a coalition of black and white women in Montgomery to fight segregated seating on city buses. She even championed the civil rights of a teenager, who had refused to give up her seat to white people on a Montgomery bus in March 1955.

And yet, Rosa Parks was never put in a position of having to defy the law herself. That all changed on December 1, 1955 when a white man demanded her seat. She refused, was arrested and fined \$14.00.

Now here's the question: What made Rosa Parks refuse to move to the back of the bus? Speaking in 1992, Mrs. Parks said history too often maintains "that my feet were hurting, and I didn't know why I refused to stand up when they told me. But the real reason of my not standing up was I felt that I had a right to be treated as any other passenger. We had endured that kind of treatment for too long." (2)

Do you see what happened here? There came a moment in Rosa Parks' life when she said enough – enough inequality, enough injustice, enough demeaning people to second class status, enough relegating people to the back of the bus because of the color of their skin. There came a moment in her life when she had to stand up for justice, for righteousness, for equality, and for her own sense of self-worth and human dignity.

Is it too much to suggest that at that moment the voice of God was speaking to her? Rosa Park's arrest triggered a 381-day boycott of the city of Montgomery's bus system which was then led by a little-known Baptist minister by the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. who only had been in Montgomery a year and was only 27 years old.

As the Montgomery bus boycott continued, Dr. King's family started getting threatening phone calls. He wondered if he could take it. He wanted out. Then around midnight, another threatening phone call came: "We're tired of you, and if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your home and kill your family."

Dr. King sat down at the kitchen table and prayed aloud that night. He reports hearing a voice calling him, "Martin, don't be afraid! Stand up for righteousness, stand up for justice, stand up for truth."

It was the voice of Jesus promising to be with him throughout the fight. Dr. King's life from that moment on is a testimony to his response to that prayer.

Several years later, before he was shot dead taking up the cause of the mostly black sanitation workers in Memphis, Tennessee, Martin Luther King, Jr. preached these words: "Even if they try to kill you, you develop the inner conviction that there are some things so precious, some things so eternally true that they are worth dying for. And if a person has not found something to die for, that person isn't fit to live!"

I don't know how many of you can identify with Corporal Rupert Trimmingham or Rosa Parks or Martin Luther King, Jr. Perhaps there was a time in your own life when you felt compelled to stand up for justice and righteousness and goodness and decency, regardless of the cost, and no matter how high the price, or unpopular the perception, because it was simply the

right thing to do – and because you could not live with yourself if you had done otherwise.

The voice of God – it is not always a voice we want to hear because we may be called to do things we might not want to do. God’s word may challenge us, stretch us and call us to move beyond comfort zone. After all, Moses was not thrilled when God named him the new leader of Israel. Samuel was not pleased when God told him to tell Eli the priest that he and his sons’ days were numbered. Jeremiah never fully accepted the call to be God’s prophet to a collapsing nation. Even Jesus did not embrace his call without dreading what it would demand from him. And yet, there is always a right-ness about the call, even if it demands not less than everything.

One of the persons I will always admire most is my father. Dad and mom were supporters of the civil rights movement at a time when many of our neighbors were uncertain about it. Many neighborhoods in New York City, especially in Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island, were solidly Irish, Italian, German, Jewish, Black or Hispanic. The idea of integration outside the workplace made people feel uncomfortable.

My parents weren’t activists, but they always treated people fairly, and never disparaged anyone because of their race or color of their skin. Dad’s beliefs were rock solid, and that was made clear to me in 1957 when I was a boy. Dad was a supervisor of an industrial plant in Brooklyn, New York when he was asked by the owner of the company to take a few of his workers with him to

Arkansas to do the electrical work on a newly constructed plant.

My father took his two best men – Ruben a black man and Gomez who was Puerto Rican. When they arrived in Arkansas, the plant manager said to my father, “Joe, you can stay and do the job. But your two companions will have to go back to New York. We don’t work with colored people here. This is an all-white work force.”

My father replied, “If my men don’t work with me, then I don’t work either. I’m going back to New York. Get someone else to do your job.”

That decision cost my father’s company a great deal of money, but dad never regretted it. When he returned from Arkansas, I asked about his decision, and he said to me, “Son, you just do what’s right, no matter the cost.”

I believe my father heard the voice of God when he made his decision. He knew what was right. In that action of his – to return to New York with his men – my father taught me one of the greatest lessons a parent can teach a child: “Always do what’s right and never, ever bow to injustice.”

(By the way, when my father died, Ruben and Gomez were honorary pallbearers at his funeral.)

Let me ask you: Was there ever a time in your life when you could no longer pretend that everything was all right when you knew it was all wrong? Perhaps there

was a time when you felt compelled to stand up for justice and truth, regardless of the cost, and no matter how high the price, or unpopular the perception, because it was simply the right thing to do – and because you could not live with yourself if you had done otherwise.

In those quiet moments of reflection, when you seek to be true to yourself and true to your deepest values and beliefs, listen for God’s voice. And when God speaks to you, don’t just sit there but act – for God’s sake and your own.

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Text – I Samuel 3: 1-10

Epiphany 2, B

- 1. Rupert Trimmingham and others, Democracy? African Americans and the War: Correspondence from Yank, 1944 (*Reporting World War II: American Journalism 1944-1946*, Library of America, 1995) 470-473**
- 2. *New York Times*, October 31, 2005, A16. See also Juan Williams, “The Long History of a Bus Ride” in the same *New York Times*.**