

A Higher Law

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

June 3, 2018

1 Samuel 3:1-20, 2 Corinthians 4:5-12, Mark 2:23-3:6

One of my favorite works of art at the Columbus Museum is a collage by the brilliant Najee Dorsey titled *B4 Rosa: Here I Stand*. You may have seen it. It tells the story of Claudette Colvin, a name I did not know before encountering this work. It inspired me to get a book and learn more about her.

On March 2, 1955, nine months before Rosa Parks, this 15 year-old high school student living in Montgomery refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus.

Many events brought her to that moment. One was the daily indignity she and others faced. Black riders had to go to the front to pay their fare. If the front seats reserved for white passengers were empty they could walk from the front to the back, but if a single white person sat in the front seats they had to step off and go to the back entrance to board. Every day. Another event was the tragic arrest and conviction of one of her high school friends. He was one of the stars of the school - smart, good-looking, a poet. He was arrested on what appeared to be trumped up charges for attacking a white woman. After a brief trial, an all-white jury sentenced him to death. Claudette and her friends were angry and ready to take a stand. In addition, her school had been studying black history all month. Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman were on her mind.

So after school on March 2, Claudette got on the bus at the corner of Dexter Avenue and Bainbridge Street. She sat by a window in the black section about halfway back near the rear door. Her friends filled the other three seats in the row. As the bus moved along Dexter it started to fill with passengers. The custom of the time was that if a white passenger needed a seat in the black section, the driver would call out "I need those seats" and all four black passengers were expected to get up and stand so that the one white passenger could sit without having to be in the same row as a black passenger.

According to the book I read, that was the custom, but it was not the law. The city bus law since 1900 had said that no rider had to give up a seat unless another was available. If the bus was entirely full, extra passengers, black or white, would have to stand. But the law was confusing. Another ordinance gave drivers authority over who sat where, so drivers routinely told black passengers to move and few people challenged the practice.

As the bus filled that day soon every seat was taken. A white woman came to stand by Claudette and her friends. The driver called out, "I need those seats." Claudette's friends all got up, leaving

three empty seats, but the woman did not sit down, not even in the bench across from Claudette. The driver again ordered Claudette to get up. She stayed in her seat and didn't say a word. The driver drove to Court Square and asked police to arrest her. As two officers dragged her off the bus, this high school girl cried out, "It's my constitutional right to sit here as much as that lady. I paid my fare, it's my constitutional right." She later explained, "I knew I had rights. I knew the rule – that you didn't have to get up for a white person if there were no empty seats left on the bus – and there weren't. Right then, I decided I wasn't gonna take it anymore."

Claudette's experience became part of *Browder versus Gayle*, the case that led the federal court to declare segregated seating on buses unconstitutional. Her attorney Fred Gray later said, "I don't mean to take anything away from Mrs. Parks, but Claudette gave all of us the moral courage to do what we did."

Claudette did what she did because she recognized a higher law. The custom of the time said the driver could tell her to sit wherever he ordered. The city law said she did not have to move if the bus was completely full. But the Constitution said she had rights. She appealed to the higher law.

Jesus and his disciples faced a similar situation. Many at that time interpreted the law to mean you should do no work at all on the sabbath. Plucking grain was work. Travelling through fields was work. Healing was work. In the minds of many, everything Jesus and the disciples did on that day could have waited a day.

To be fair, the Pharisees and those who agreed with them meant well. The laws they emphasized were not necessarily mean-spirited like segregation laws. They were an attempt to make things better. The people of Israel had been through so much – war, exile, loss of land and culture. Now they were living under Roman oppression. The Pharisees were among many who believed the sufferings of the present time were the direct result of disobeying the law of God. If they could just get back to the law, they thought, God would reward them with freedom and prosperity. So they searched the scriptures to find laws people might have missed. They were particularly concerned about Sabbath practice and fellowship around meals. To this group of people, being holy meant keeping the Sabbath and not eating with sinners.

There is evidence to suggest that some Pharisees were reasonable about this. Other rabbis around this time said, "The Sabbath is handed over to you, not you to it" or "Profane one Sabbath for a person's sake, so that he may keep many Sabbaths." In other words, if doing work on a Sabbath would save someone, do it. Some Pharisees likely agreed with Jesus, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath."

The problem was that Jesus was making a habit of this. Most of the instances of the word Sabbath in this passage are actually plural. On the *Sabbaths*, he was going through the grainfields. They wanted to see whether he would heal on the *sabbaths*. Today's gospel story was not a random act of Jesus and the disciples in response to extraordinary human need.

Instead, Jesus and the disciples strategically challenged the Pharisees' hyper-emphasis on the Sabbath. They were deliberately plucking and walking and healing on the Sabbath.

And note that this is only Mark chapter 3. We're not even seventy verses into the gospel. Jesus intentionally started his ministry this way.

In challenging sabbath practice, Jesus challenged a way of faith that is still with us. The Pharisees weren't the first to respond to God this way and our generation won't be the last. This way of faith focuses on the human response to God's law, whether people are living up to God's moral standards. This way of faith says that because God is holy, people must achieve a certain level of holiness to be acceptable to God. As a result, it sees some people as more holy and therefore more deserving than others. This kind of faith often gets bound by the customs of the time. It is the faith of litmus tests. It may focus intently on one moral issue and ignore other equally important moral issues. Or it may focus on personal piety and ignore justice and human dignity. "People should keep the sabbath and if they don't they are not good people." Humanity is made for the Sabbath.

Jesus turned this way of faith around. It's not that rules did not matter. Jesus was clear - he had come not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. But for Jesus the key was not the letter of the law but God's intention behind it. For Jesus, the focus was on God's love and grace and mercy poured out on all creation. In love, God created the Sabbath to free an enslaved people. The Sabbath was not a yardstick to measure faithfulness but a blessing to protect and nurture God's beloved children. And from this good gift other blessings should flow. The Sabbath should lead to nourishment and healing for people.

In plucking grain and healing on the Sabbath, Jesus and the disciples appealed to something higher than the customs of the time. Jesus appealed to the law of love and freedom, the law of God's original purpose. God wanted people to eat. God wanted people to be healed. To Jesus, the sabbath represented the law of love. The sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath.

Imagine what this world would be like if we deferred to the higher law of love in all things. It would solve so many problems. So many situations in this world are legal and customary and accepted but not loving. For Jesus, the higher law of love meant challenging the customs of his time that stood in love's way.

In a report we read today, Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby said this: "Loving our neighbor places responsibilities upon us. We have responsibilities to speak, even when it might be easier to stay quiet, to point to injustice and to challenge others to join us in righting it." That's the law of love at work.

After her arrest things got hard for Claudette. Some in her community celebrated what she had done, but others were scared because she had rocked the boat. In her confusion she got involved

with an older man who took advantage of her. When she realized she was pregnant, she was kicked out of school, and suddenly on her own. But still she was willing to speak. Six weeks after her baby was born, she testified before the federal court. She did not know how the judges would rule, but when she came home, she looked at her baby boy fast asleep and said to him, “I think I might have done us some good today.”

When we follow the law of love – we are able to say to our children and our neighbor’s children and our children’s children “I think I might have done us some good today.”

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Rev. Grace Burton-Edwards
St. Thomas Episcopal Church
2100 Hilton Ave.
Columbus, GA 31906
StThomasColumbus.org