

“My Feets Is Tired but My Soul Is Rested”

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

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Deuteronomy 34:1-5, 10; I Corinthians 9:24-25; Philippians 3:13b-14; Luke 18:1-8

The title of this sermon comes from one of the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement and yet history does not remember her full name. She was known as Mother Pollard, and she was a leading church elder in Montgomery, Alabama during the bus boycott at the start of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s ministry.

King was only 26 years old and under intense pressure, but the struggle was difficult for Mother Pollard, too. The bus boycott meant that she had to walk miles every day carrying heavy loads. King wrote about her in his book, *The Strength to Love*. I will let him tell the story:

“One of the most dedicated participants in the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, was an elderly woman whom we affectionately called Mother Pollard. Although poverty-stricken and uneducated, she was amazingly intelligent and possessed a deep understanding of the meaning of the movement.

“After having walked for several weeks, she was asked if she were tired. With ungrammatical profundity, she answered, ‘My feets is tired, but my soul is rested.’

“On a particular Monday evening, following a tension-packed week which included being arrested and receiving numerous threatening telephone calls, I spoke at a mass meeting. I attempted to convey an overt impression of strength and courage, although I was inwardly depressed and fear-stricken.

“At the end of the meeting, Mother Pollard came to the front of the church and said, ‘Come here, son.’ I immediately went to her and hugged her affectionately. ‘Something is wrong with you,’ she said. ‘You didn’t talk strong tonight.’

Seeking further to disguise my fears, I retorted, ‘On, no, Mother Pollard, nothing is wrong. I am feeling fine as ever.’

“But her insight was discerning. ‘Now you can’t fool me,’ she said. ‘I knows something is wrong....

“Before I could respond, she looked directly into my eyes and said, ‘I don’t told you we is with you all the way.’ Then her face became radiant and she said in words of quiet certainty, ‘But even if we ain’t with you, God’s gonna take care of you....’

King continued, “Since that dreary night in 1956, Mother Pollard has passed on to glory and I have known very few quiet days. I have been tortured without and tormented within by the raging fires of tribulation. I have been forced to muster what strength and courage I have to withstand howling winds of pain and jostling storms of adversity. But as the years have unfolded the eloquently simple words of Mother Pollard have come back again and again to give light and peace and guidance to my troubled soul.”

I know that today our feet is tired from the pandemic and political road we have been walking. Where can we find the light, peace and guidance that Mother Pollard gave? How can we find rest for our soul?

King wrote in the same chapter, “A positive religious faith does not offer an illusion that we shall be exempt from pain and suffering, nor does it imbue us with the idea that life is a drama of unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease. Rather, it instills us with the inner equilibrium needed to face strains, burdens, and fears that inevitably come.” (*Chapter IV*)

Recently the news has carried stories about pandemic fatigue. We have grown tired of daily inconvenience, disruption and anxiety. On top of that our culture is suffering collective nervous exhaustion from the political, social and environmental stakes of this election which are nothing short of life or death for our democracy and our planet. On top of that, many of us have suffered personal hardships and losses in recent months.

Our feet are very tired. We need to have compassion for ourselves if we wish that we could be “exempt from further pain and suffering,” if we wish for a little “unalloyed comfort and untroubled ease.”

Yet spiritual wisdom tells us that the true and lasting remedy for tired feet is not to lounge on the couch eating bonbons. A Swahili song puts it this way: “Life has meaning only in the struggle...so let us celebrate the struggle.”

Not only does our culture not celebrate or welcome struggle, we think of it as something wrong. We have been brainwashed by billions of dollars of advertising to crave pleasure and ease, to glorify comfort and wealth, and to pursue the ego’s programs for happiness as our highest goal.

The disastrous bankruptcy of this approach to life has led not only to social, economic and environmental injustice, but also to record high levels of anxiety, depression and despair.

The way out is not to try to escape life's struggles, but as King said, the answer is to cultivate "the inner equilibrium needed to face strains, burdens, and fears that inevitably come."

Today we heard the mountaintop vision of Moses looking over into the Promised Land. He would not have reached that mountain without accepting the struggle for liberation from slavery, or the struggle of forty years wandering in the wilderness with no idea how or when they would emerge.

Nor would they have survived those struggles without their trust that God would take care of them, that the Spirit would show a way where there was no way, as King put it from his perspective on a similar wilderness journey.

The turning point in spiritual maturity comes when we accept that affliction and struggle are part of life, and we transform our suffering into wisdom by learning to find equilibrium in the midst of struggle. We develop the ability to observe our pain or discomfort without getting caught up in its drama. We develop an inner calm in the eye of the hurricane, and from there we find a path of faith through the storm.

A clear vision of our goal helps when our strains, burdens and fears grow heavy and our feet get tired. As Viktor Frankl found in Auschwitz, "Those who have a 'why' to live can bear with almost any 'how.'" Moses, Mother Pollard and Dr. King all had a vision of what their struggle would bring. They had the 'why' of their love of God and neighbor, and their longing for freedom, justice and peace.

We need our own vision and our own why, and we need something else as well. We need what King called "the urgency of now." We hear it in the other three scripture passages for today.

Jesus urges us to persevere, to pray always and not lose heart, to be like the widow who keeps on knocking on the judge's door until justice comes. Paul urges us to have the discipline of an athlete and run to win, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.

We each have a vision of what we wish for election day. We have these next ten days to persevere, working toward the sabbath rest after November 3rd by making the greatest exertion we can now. We will never have this chance again. Our feet are tired but we need to find rest in our soul to enable us to keep on walking to reach our Promised Land.

We know, though, that after a sabbath we will need to get back up and continue the movement, no matter who wins or what transpires. Racism will not end, inequity will not end, the earth will not be healed, democracy will not be revived without our ongoing participation in the struggle.

Jim Schley has been touring the state performing in a theater adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's novel, *It Can't Happen Here*. Most of the novel takes place in Vermont in the 1930s when a populist, narcissistic, authoritarian president gets elected and turns America into a fascist dictatorship.

The central character is Doremus Jessup, the editor of a Vermont newspaper. Jessup opposes the government, gets beaten and thrown in a concentration camp and ultimately escapes and joins the resistance. The novel ends with Jessup in the Midwest as a grassroots organizer for the movement. He gets a tip and narrowly escapes being caught. In the last line we see him driving to a safe house near the Canadian border: "And still Doremus goes on in the red sunrise, for a Doremus Jessup can never die."

The production that Jim Schley is in has suffered a tragedy. Jeff Tolbert, the 57-year-old actor playing Doremus Jessup, died of a massive heart attack on October 15th while biking.

They cancelled the next two stops on the tour, but this Sunday they are rising to do one final performance in White River Junction in honor of Jeff Tolbert, who felt it was important that as many people as possible see the show during this election season.

It may sound crazy to people in our culture to suggest that we celebrate the struggle, but if we follow that spiritual wisdom we will find comfort, inspiration and meaning. We will find the equilibrium we need for the long wilderness journey to fulfill the vision of the Promised Land, God's realm of love, justice and peace on earth.

So let us go on in the red sunrise, knowing that the Spirit of Jesus and Paul, Mother Pollard and Dr. King, Jeff Tolbert and millions of Doremus Jessups across America today, will never die.

Knowing that, we can join them and say, truly, "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested." And walk on.

I invite you to pray in silence and ask the Spirit to guide your feet in the coming days...