



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
10-16-16

I'd like to tell you a story about Walter McMillian, Bryan Stevenson, and Mrs. Williams.

They all lived in Alabama – where in 1987 – Walter McMillian was arrested for murder – the murder of a young white woman named Ronda Morrison. Walter McMillian did not know Ronda Morrison, had never met her, and was attending a family fish fry at his family's home on the morning she was shot. But it appears that the local sheriff and investigators were getting nervous and frustrated and felt the need to provide the community with an arrest. So they paid and set free two men to become witnesses that Walter was seen at the crime scene. Neither of the witnesses had ever met Walter, who was considered in the white community as a bit of an uppity black man who ran his own tree cutting business and lived out in the rural part of the county.

Once Walter was arrested the court system moved rapidly and Walter found himself on death row, waiting to be executed. Now forward to 1989, when a young black man named Bryan Stevenson and a class mate decided to open a nonprofit law center in Alabama, dedicated to providing free legal services to men and women on death row. They named it the Equal Justice Initiative. Eventually Walter McMillian came to their attention. As Bryan spoke with family members and some community members it became apparent that Walter could not have committed the murder. Yet filings for an appeal were denied amidst a threat from the judge and bomb and phone threats to the attorney.

Years went by and still Bryan Stevenson tried legal means to have the case reexamined. By 1991 both witnesses were filled with remorse and wished to change their testimony. Neither had been near the crime scene or even seen Walter in the area. After much pressure a judge agreed to hear a postconviction evidentiary hearing. Mr. Stevenson was granted three days to make his case. On the first morning of the hearing the attorneys for the prosecution were bothered when the courtroom was filled with dozens of people from the community – mostly black and poor. They were people who knew Walter and his family, and that first day went well. Several witnesses were called to state where Walter had been on the morning of the murder. And the primary witness nervously but carefully told how he had lied about being with Walter at the murder scene. By the day's end, Mr. Stevenson was feeling some confidence.

But when he arrived at the courtroom the next morning he found the family and friends of Walter out in the lobby, milling about. They told him that they weren't being allowed inside the

courtroom. When Bryan Stevenson approached the door to enter and deputy sheriff put out his arm and told him he couldn't enter. Three times he asked to enter and finally he said, "I'm the defense attorney. I think I have to be able to go inside the courtroom." The deputy became uncertain and told him he had to go check. When he return Bryan was allowed inside the door.

And he noticed that the entire room had been altered. Inside the door was a large metal detector, and on the other side was an enormous German Shepherd being held in control by a police office. The benches that had been filled the day before with Walter's supporters now held older white people from the town. When Attorney Stevenson asked about why the folks outside couldn't enter, he received a blank look and was told they must not have gotten there in time. A bailiff was instructed to go speak to the deputy and let the doors be opened. But there was room for only a few more people.

When Bryan explained that only some of them could come in, a minister with the group began to pick out who should get in. After family he immediately picked Mrs. Williams and the crowd smiled. Mrs. Williams was an older black woman who was carefully dressed and commanding with her presence. Slowly, with grace and dignity she proceeded to the door and glanced around the room for where to sit. She stepped carefully up to the metal detector and froze when she saw the dog. Her face filled with absolute fear. Her body sagged and she seemed paralyzed. Groaning, tears began to run down her face and shaking and sadly, she turned around and walked out of the room.

Late that afternoon, when court adjourned for the day, Bryan Stevenson noticed Mrs. Williams sitting on a bench alone outside of the courthouse. She stood and said, Attorney Stevenson, I feel so bad. I feel so bad. I should have some into that courtroom this morning. I was supposed to be in that courtroom this morning" and she began to weep. No matter how much Bryan tried to assure her she insisted that she was supposed to be there. "I tried, Lord knows I tried, Mr Stevenson, but when I saw that dog....When I saw that dog I thought about 1965, when we gathered at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma and tried to march for our voting rights. They beat us and put those dogs on us.. I tried to move, Attorney Stevenson, I wanted to move, but I just couldn't do it." And with a world of sadness she let go of his hand and walked away.

The next morning at they were preparing to start the hearing there was a commotion at the courtroom door and looking up, there was Mrs. Stevenson, again dressed impeccably in her scarf and hat, with her handbag tight at her side. She stood swaying in the doorway, speaking to herself, saying over and over, "I ain't scared of no dog. The officers motioned for her to move forward. Slowly, with her head held high she moved through the metal detector. Then she stopped and stared at the dog, until she said loudly enough for all to hear, "I ain't scared of no dog! And she moved on into the room. The black folks inside beamed with joy as she passed them. She sat down near the front of the room and said with a broad smile, "Attorney Stevenson, I'm here!"

Bryan responded, "Mrs. Williams, it's so good to see you here. Thank you for coming."

The courtroom was filled and they brought in Walter in preparation to start. But again Mrs Williams called out. "No Attorney Stevenson, you didn't hear me. I said, I'm here." She spoke

Quite loudly, so a bit embarrassed Bryan turned around and told her he had indeed heard her. And then the judge walked in and all stood.

The judge took his seat and all others sat back down. But then there was an unusually long pause and people, including the judge were looking around behind Bryan. And there was Mrs. Williams still standing. People gestured for her to sit but she leaned her head back and shouted, "I'm here!" People chuckled nervously as she sat down, but Bryan could see tears in her eyes.

And that's when Bryan knew what she was saying..."I may be old. I may be poor, I may be black, but I'm here. I'm here because I've got this vision of justice that compels me to be a witness. I'm here because I'm supposed to be here. I'm here because you can't keep me away."

I'm here and you can't keep my away. When Jesus asks whether he will find faith on earth, he is using a word that means steadfastness. Is there steadfastness on this earth? Are people continuing to seek justice and not lose heart? What courage that takes, what perseverance, what faith. I'm here. I matter, my voice matters. You are here. You matter, your voice matters. And right now matters. Don't lose heart.

Despite all their evidence the judge denied a retrial and it was another year, a new judge, and an expose by 60 minutes before they were granted a chance again to present a new motion which was granted and Walter McMillian was set free from prison.

Thanks be to God.