

MLK Sunday: “The Firebrand and the First Lady”  
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CALL TO WORSHIP

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

READING back cover/pp. 102 – 104, “The Firebrand and the First Lady” by Patricia Bell Scott

Normally, each year, I can’t wait to preach about the Dr. King and his life of prophethood, non-violent activism, and hope. But this year, because I talked so much about Jesus last month, and MLK is a lot like Jesus, I thought I’d take a break from the men prophets, and focus instead on the *women* prophets, about whom we don’t hear much. Today I share the good news about a female version of MLK you probably never heard of: Pauli Murray.

Last summer, I read this fabulous book published in 2016, “The Firebrand and the First Lady” by women’s studies scholar Patricia Bell Scott.

In 1938, the 28-year old, African American Pauli Murray wrote a letter to the president and first lady, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, protesting racial segregation in the south. Eleanor wrote back, and so began a remarkable friendship that would last for a quarter-century, as Pauli became an author, a lawyer, a principal strategist in the fight to protect Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, a co-founder of the National Organization for Women, and Eleanor became a diplomat and first chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights. The two women were both influential activists for justice and equality. They visited with one another regularly, as the First Lady’s rigorous schedule allowed, and exchanged over 300 letters, gifts, flowers, candy, and cards over the course of their friendship.

The letters were not always friendly, for Pauli boldly brought many difficult truths to the Roosevelts’ attention. My first reading gives you a taste of that. This is right after FDR gave the order to round up all the Japanese for internment in 1942, although Eleanor had done everything in her power to dissuade the president. The firebrand, Pauli Murray, had written a fiery letter to FDR, essentially saying, “if your excuse to round up Japanese Americans is for their own protection, then why not round up all the blacks in the south for *their* own protection from regularly getting lynched and killed and beaten up by Jim Crow?” Pauli was beyond frustrated that Washington was doing nothing to address the epidemic of brutal violence against African Americans around the country.

Pauli’s tactic to get such a letter under the President’s eyeballs was to send it to Eleanor first, asking for her own opinions about the matters Pauli raised, in hopes that Eleanor

would then point out to FDR that Pauli was right. In this case, though, Eleanor was angered by the comparison of Japanese and African Americans, and wrote Pauli back saying as much. And then, here are excerpts of what Pauli wrote back to Eleanor.

“Dear Mrs. Roosevelt . . .”

PRAYER Words by Coretta Scott King:

Dr. King once said that we all have to decide whether we “will walk in the light of creative altruism or the darkness of destructive selfishness. Life’s most persistent and nagging question, he said, is ‘what are you doing for others?’”

[We can be of] service in hospitals and shelters and prisons and wherever people need some help. [MLK Day] is a day of volunteering to feed the hungry, rehabilitate housing, tutoring those who can’t read, mentoring at-risk youngsters, consoling the broken-hearted and a thousand other projects for building the beloved community of his dream.

We call you to commemorate this Holiday by making your personal commitment to serve humanity with the vibrant spirit of unconditional love that was [Dr. King’s] greatest strength, and which empowered all of the great victories of his leadership.

May we who follow Martin now pledge to serve humanity, promote his teachings and carry forward his legacy into the 21st Century.

AMEN

OFFERING ANNOUNCEMENTS

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READING p. 17

I want you to hear about how amazing Eleanor Roosevelt was, as well, for the friendship between the two women only happened because of Eleanor’s great wisdom and humanity. So here’s just a little bit about her, from the Prelude of the book . . . and when I mention “Camp Tera”, this was the female version of the Civilian Conservation Corps, the CCC, that Eleanor single-handedly drew into existence, since just as many women, she knew, were also out of work in the years following the Great Depression.

SERMON

The problem of working with a book like this for a sermon is that I have way too much material to share!

There are so many anecdotes of the hard-ship Pauli Murray faced early in her life, and even well into adulthood, because she was: rebellious, smart, black, female, gay, the grand-daughter of a slave, *and* it was 1930’s America. The hardships must be understood

in order to fully appreciate her perseverance and track record of achievement, which I wish to lift from obscurity.

Pauli was born in 1910 in Maryland but mainly grew up in North Carolina. She lost her mom to a cerebral hemorrhage when she was only three years old. Pauli's father was a teacher trained at Howard, who suffered from mental illness after typhoid fever; when Pauli was 13, he was bludgeoned to death in a mental institution where such practices were common against black men, and the racially-motivated trauma and photos of his dead body haunted her. This is why the barbaric act of lynching upset and disturbed Pauli so.

It's hard for me to imagine my own father being treated that way – I'm not sure how I would live after that, with such anger. For Pauli, it made her “a firebrand” for justice.

And I would like to remind us that today's Jim Crow, today's lynchings, occur out of sight/out of mind behind prison walls in wrongful executions and violent treatment of inmates; today's lynchings also still occur on city streets when men like Eric Garner are choked to death in an illegal choke-hold by a police officer who's still on duty as I speak. Today's Jim Crow is in the death of Eric Garner's daughter who died a few weeks ago at age 27, activist and political hopeful, Erica Garner, because many black women die soon after their primary family members get killed by police – there's a [new study](#) that shows this.

You see, there are thousands of Paulis still out there today, completely self-supporting upon graduation from high school. Millions of young and older women of color who still struggle to make their way in a racist and sexist world; where the police can shoot your partner, your son, your father dead, and there are no meaningful repercussions. If Pauli could speak to them now, she would say, nevertheless, that “I want you to know the souls on which you stand,” because she was one of those intrepid souls who changed laws that change lives, who opened opportunities for all women, but especially women who belonged to “an undesirable or despised ethnic group,” be she black, Jewish, or Cuban.

Now because Pauli, at Camp Tera in 1938, did not stand up in the First Lady's presence when she visited the camp, Pauli was harshly reprimanded and punished for this lack of respect. They searched her things, and found *das Kapital* by Karl Marx, which she only possessed because it was a required reading text for the political philosophy she studied at Hunter College in New York – she had brought it along to camp with a stack of novels and poetry. She was thrown out of the camp.

Now, she only attended Hunter because she wasn't allowed to attend Columbia University, her first choice, even with TWO high school diplomas, because, at the time, no women were admitted. Even though it was so hard to be a black, self-supporting, southern student in 1928, in a sea of New Yorkers, she managed to graduate in 1933. She was one of four blacks in a class of 247 women.

Because un-employment was rampant, eventually, she came to be at the camp Eleanor founded, specifically for young women like Pauli. Even though she got kicked out, she endeavored to return to school for an advanced degree, but only after a mighty battle that served as entrée for her friendship with Eleanor. In her first fiery letter, Pauli took FDR to task as alumnus of the University of North Carolina, for in the 1930s, this institution did not admit blacks, and this was where Pauli had set her sights. Her last two paragraphs of the letter to the president read as:

Yesterday, you placed your approval on the University of North Carolina as an institution of liberal thought. You spoke of the necessity of change in a body of law to meet the problems of an accelerated era of civilization. You called on Americans to support a liberal philosophy based on democracy. What does this mean for Negro Americans? Does it mean that we, at last, may participate freely, and on the basis of equality, with our fellow-citizens in working out the problems of this democracy? Does it mean that Negro students in the South will be allowed to sit down with white students and study a problem which is fundamental and mutual to both groups? Does it mean that UNC is ready to open its doors to Negro students seeking enlightenment on the social and economic problems which the South faces? Does it mean, that as an alumnus of UNC, you are ready to use your prestige and influence to see to it that this step is taken toward greater opportunity for mutual understanding of race relations in the South?

Or does it mean, that everything you said has no meaning for us as Negroes, that again we are to be set aside and passed over for more important problems? I appeal for an answer because I, and my people are perplexed. Sincerely yours, Pauli Murray

Part of Pauli's pluck was because she came entirely from a family of hard-working educators in North Carolina, which she explains early in her letter. Her "grandfather was a Union soldier who gave his eye for the liberation of his race." When the war ended he spent the rest of his life establishing schools and educating freed slaves. Pauli's first letter to FDR should be handled like a sacred text of our country's saga, forever stumbling toward democracy - its truth and its power is unmistakable.

Eleanor Roosevelt was someone who recognized truth when she saw it, and she did everything she could in her power from that point on to advocate for Pauli and other people like her. Pathetically, yet not surprisingly, UNC did not admit a black student until 1951, a man. Pauli gave up on UNC and went to Howard to complete her law degree; then, she went on to earn a prestigious fellowship at Harvard to continue her law studies, however when they realized she was a woman, she was rejected, and ended up in Berkeley where women of color were allowed to study law in the 1940's.

The saga of Murray's education is fascinating, including losing a teaching post at Cornell University in 1952, due to McCarthyism – her references included Eleanor, Thurgood Marshall, and Phillip Randolph – these folks were considered "too radical."

There ought to be a book, “The Radical ER” because while there’s a book about the radical presidency of FDR, the truth is that Eleanor was far *more* radical, and many of her progressive notions and initiatives would be considered even more radical now.

There isn’t time to share all the labor and social justice organizing Pauli did, but it’s just as impressive a record as MLK’s, and so is Eleanor Roosevelt’s. Before this book, I had no idea what a bad-ass ER was! I do know we have not seen the likes of her since, and I encourage everyone to study both women because they are models for what is needed in today’s world: unwavering commitment and hard work in service of equality and democracy, in service of compassion.

Just knowing that the caliber of these women existed within our lifetimes, or our parents’ lifetimes, gives me hope, for it means they can exist again! Just as MLK’s message of peace, justice, and the beloved community resonates in the same way, and we see him exist again in the prophetic ministry of the Rev. Dr. William Barber, as he continues where MLK left off in “The Poor People’s Campaign.”

But where’s our new Eleanor? Where’s our new Pauli? They are us, ladies, they are us, and all the women who fight for justice with little recognition, because we are women.

Pauli Murray ended her life and career as the first African American Episcopal priest. Which gives me chills, because she had already done so much by then. The summation of her knowledge led her to religious leadership.

As you can tell, this book just floored me. For one thing, I realized how ignorant I was of Eleanor Roosevelt. But what cut even deeper was not knowing about Pauli Murray, until I ran into the review of this book in the New York Times. This book was so intense, that soon after reading it, I forgot I had wanted to read Pauli’s writings, beyond that of her biographer, and I looked on Amazon a few days ago to order a couple things. Murray published several books of fiction, memoir, poetry, and law studies, and - of course - it was so sad to see that many of her works are no longer in print: because, it’s still hard for women of color to get published and stay in print, let alone be remembered, and known.

This was starkly put into relief, when I went to the California African American Museum this past Thursday afternoon with a friend. We saw the exhibit, “We Wanted a Revolution! Radical Black Women Artists of 1965 – 85.”

Back in the late 60’s and 70’s, there was a lot of hope that black women would finally get their day of opportunity and equality, be they artists or attorneys, theologians, or writers. But they were bitterly disappointed when the white feminist movement excluded them. They were so upset many stopped calling themselves feminist and called themselves Womanist instead, since “feminists” did not speak for them.

I attended a Women and Religion conference at Harvard in 2003, where feminist theologians like Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Reuther kind of strutted their stuff like male peacocks. I don’t remember the theologians of color as much, even though I

was reading them at the time. The point is, this rift has never healed, or been addressed meaningfully in mainstream consciousness.

The echoes of racism and the echoes of sexism repeat upon each other one age after another, until we do what Dr. King kept asking us to do: with our bare hands, with our daily lives, build, one brick at a time, the beloved community, the righteous society.

Of the rifts in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminism, white women must especially take ownership of the ways they have only spoken out for themselves and their station. They might take a lesson from Eleanor Roosevelt who lucidly spoke out for ALL women, regardless of class and race. The friendship of Eleanor and Pauli is of Biblical proportions in the saga of women's fight for equality world-wide. It is reminiscent of the Book of Ruth, and since we know everything occurred between them just as it was told, "anyone with two ears to hear, should listen!"

Friendships that cross class and ethnicity - that occur between a bona fied Daughter of the Revolution and a grand-daughter of a slave - can change the world. And so may we all seek such unlikely friendships out: these glowing orbs of power that are the building blocks of the beloved and just society, where we sit down with one another, and as one people, work through our problems together, seeing in each other our own humanity, "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in single garment of destiny (MLK)."

MAY IT BE SO.