

## **ROSA PARKS: THE WOMAN WHO CHANGED A NATION**

On Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday I can't imagine preaching on a finer champion of racial justice than Rosa Parks who died a couple years ago and was a woman who literally changed the course of American history, while helping set King's very career into motion.

I have a personal reason for retelling her courageous story today. In the recent past when two of our grandchildren, Trevor and Corinne Chapman, were in elementary school in East County, they acted in a play about Rosa Parks. This performance touched me so deeply that I decided, then and there, to preach on Parks' resounding legacy. Every now and again, I ask myself: what would Rosa Parks have done in this situation? I ask myself: am I willing to embody a piece of Rosa Parks' bravery when I speak today or participate in a deed of compassionate resistance?

According to the old saying, "some people are born to greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Well, greatness was certainly thrust upon Rosa Parks, but this modest seamstress found herself equal to the challenge. Known as the "mother of the Civil Rights Movement," Parks almost single-handedly energized a revolution that would eventually secure equal treatment under the law for all black Americans.

For those of us who lived through the unsettling 1950s and 1960s, even participated in the civil rights struggle, the soft-spoken Rosa Parks was more, much more than the woman who refused to give up her bus seat to a white man in Montgomery,

Alabama—rather her's was an act that forever altered white America's view of people of color, yea, changed America itself.

From a modern perspective, Park's actions on December 1, 1955 hardly seem extraordinary; tired after a long day's work, Rosa baldly refused to budge from her seat in order to accommodate a white passenger on a city bus. At the time, however, her defiant gesture actually broke a law, one of many bits of Jim Crow legislation that caused black Americans to suffer outrageous indignities in a racist society.

However, Parks was consumed not by the prospect of making history, but rather by the tedium of survival in the Jim Crow South. The tedium had become unbearable, and Rosa Parks acted to change it. Back then, she was an outlaw. Today she's a hero.

She was born Rosa McCauley in Tuskegee, Alabama on Feb. 4, 1913. When Rosa was still a young child, her parents separated, and Rosa moved with her mother to Montgomery. There Rosa grew up in an extended family that included grandparents and her younger brother, Sylvester.

Montgomery, Alabama was hardly an hospitable city for blacks in that era. Rosa was shunted into second-rate all black schools, and she faced daily rounds of laws governing her behavior in public places. Rosa always detested having to drink from special water fountains and having to forgo lunch at the whites-only restaurants downtown. Still, with her mother's help, Rosa was able to grow up proud of herself and other black people, even while suffering under these degrading restrictions.

At twenty, Rosa married a barber named Raymond Parks. The couple both held jobs and enjoyed a modest degree of prosperity. In her spare time, Mrs. Parks became active in the NAACP and the Montgomery Voters League, a group that helped blacks to

pass a special test so they could register to vote. By the time she reached mid-life, Rosa Parks was no stranger to white intimidation. Like many other Southern blacks, she often boycotted the public facilities marked “Colored,” walking up stairs rather than taking elevators, for instance.

The Jim Crow rules for the public bus system in Montgomery almost defy belief today. Black customers had to enter the bus at the front door, pay the fare, exit the front door and climb aboard again at the rear door. Plus, even though the majority of bus passengers might be black, the front four rows were always reserved for white customers.

It was a common sight in those days to see black men and women standing in silent fury over the four empty rows reserved for whites. Behind these seats was a *middle* section that blacks could use, only if there was no white demand.

However, if so much as one white customer needed a seat in this “no-one’s land”, all the blacks in that section had to move. This was, as you can see, pure madness and caused no end of trouble and hard feeling. In fact, Parks herself was once thrown off a bus for refusing to endure the charade of entry by the back door. In the year preceding Park’s fateful ride, three other black women had been arrested for refusing to give up their seats to white men. Still the system was firmly entrenched, and Parks would often walk home to spare herself the humiliation.

Before we revisit that fateful day in history, December 1, 1955, more context is in order. Rosa Parks had been active for 12 years in the local NAACP chapter, serving as its secretary. So, hers wasn’t a spur of the moment decision. And she didn’t single-handedly give birth to the civil rights efforts, but Rosa was part of an existing movement for

change, at a time when success was far from certain. There were many mentors and cohorts who assisted her in preparation for December 1st.

It simply reminds us that no consequential act happens in a vacuum. Social activists don't appear out of nowhere, nor are they larger than life, nor do they act on their own. Rosa Parks acted in concert with and on behalf of others. Let's never forget all the moral dues she'd paid, leading up to that day. And let's never forget all her NAACP comrades who supported her in preparation.

You see, social activists are links in a chain of influence too numerous, too complex to trace. But being aware that such chains exist, that we can choose to join them, and add our singular links to the chain, is one of the primary ways to sustain hope, as moral activists today, especially when our individual actions seem insignificant.

Now back to the story. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks had a particularly tiring day. She was employed as a seamstress at the Montgomery Fair department store, and she'd spent the day pressing numerous pairs of pants. Rosa later admitted that her back and shoulders ached terribly that day. Parks was forty two at the time, and she deliberately let one full bus pass in order to find a seat on the next one. The seat she eventually found was in the middle section of the bus, because the back was filled.

A few stops further down the line, a white man got on and demanded a seat. The driver ordered Parks and three other black customers to move. The other riders did as they were told, but Parks quietly refused to give up her seat. The driver threatened to call the police. Parks softly yet firmly said: "Go ahead and call them."

There then occurred one of those little vignettes that could have changed the course of history. The police officers asked the driver if he wanted to swear out a warrant

or if he wanted them to let Rosa Parks simply go with a warning. The driver said he wanted to swear out a warrant, and this decision and the convergence of a number of historical forces sealed the death warrant of the Jim Crow South.

Parks' act of civil disobedience was in fact a dangerous, even reckless, move in 1950s Alabama. In fact, Rosa not only risked legal sanction but even physical harm; however, her bold act clarified for people, far beyond Montgomery, the cruelty and humiliation inherent in the laws and customs of segregation. As King would say: "No one can understand the action Rosa Parks took that day, unless we realize that eventually the cup of endurance runs over, and the human personality cries out, 'I can take it no longer.'"

"She sat down in order that we might stand up," the Rev. Jesse Jackson later remarked. "Her imprisonment opened the doors for our long journey toward freedom."

Parks was driven to the police station, booked, fingerprinted, and jailed. She was also photographed as she was being fingerprinted, a snapshot that has since found its way into history textbooks. Parks was granted one telephone call, and she used it to contact E. D. Nixon, a prominent member of Montgomery's NAACP chapter.

Nixon was understandably outraged, but he also sensed that in Parks, his community might have the perfect individual to serve as a symbol of Southern injustice. Nixon called a liberal white lawyer, Clifford Durr, who agreed to represent Parks. After consulting with the attorney, her husband and her mother, Rosa Parks agreed to undertake a court challenge of the segregationist law that had led to her arrest.

Word of Parks' arrest spread quickly throughout Montgomery's black community, and several influential black leaders decided the time was ripe to try a

boycott of the public transportation system. One of those leaders, the 26 year-old preacher named Martin Luther King, Jr., used the mimeograph machine at his Baptist church to make 7000 copies of a leaflet advertising the boycott. The message of the leaflet was plain: “Don’t ride the bus to work, to town, to school, or any place on Monday December 5...if you work, take a cab, share a ride, or walk.”

The black boycott of Montgomery’s city buses was almost universal on December 5, 1955. A meeting on the subject that evening drew an overflow crowd, numbering in the thousands, and a decision was made to continue the boycott indefinitely. On Tuesday, December 6<sup>th</sup>, Parks was found guilty and fined \$10, plus \$4 in court fees. She and her attorney appealed the ruling, while the boycott wore on.

For 381 days, blacks carpooled and walked to work, to stores, and to church. Their unified effort not only helped put an end to Jim Crow sectioning on the buses; it also proved financially devastating for the bus company. In November of 1956, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation on transportation was unconstitutional.

It was this monumental event, watched by the entire world that triggered the modern-day black freedom movement and made a living legend of Rosa Parks.

It isn’t necessarily easy to be a living legend, however. Parks and her family received numerous threats and almost constant telephone harassment. The strain actually caused her dear husband, Raymond Parks, to suffer a nervous breakdown. And in 1957 Rosa and Raymond Parks and her mother felt forced to move north to Detroit. If Rosa Parks was safer in Detroit, she was never quite allowed to recede into anonymity. As the years passed, Parks was sought out repeatedly as a dignified spokesperson for the civil rights movement.

A number of universities awarded her honorary degrees, and she earned a prestigious job on the staff of Detroit congressman John Conyers, who said: “32 years later Rosa Parks’ ardent devotion to human rights still burns brightly, like a well-tended torch that ignites her spirit and calls her to service whenever she’s needed.”

Age didn’t rob Parks of her grace and grit, nor did it restrict her travels and activities. She made 25-30 personal appearances per year and remained a vocal opponent against racism in America and against apartheid in South Africa. Her crowning achievement, however, was the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, which she founded in Detroit, a foundation offering career training for 12-18 year-olds with special attention to education and motivation. She also oversaw programs such as “Pathways to Freedom” which encouraged young African Americans to learn about their heritage and reach their full potential.

Asked to reveal the secret of her positive attitude, Rosa said: “I find that if I’m thinking too much of my own problems and the fact that at times things aren’t like I want them to be, I don’t make any progress at all. But if I look around and see what I can do, then I love.”

The woman known as the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement continued to inspire well into her eighties, and the awards in her honor continued to roll in. In July of 1999, the U.S. Congress awarded Parks the Congressional Gold Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest civilian award.

The message of her life continued to be told through books and film. In 1993 she published a children’s book entitled *Rosa Parks: My Story*. The book is an historical reminder to children that the freedoms they enjoy today were hard won. She wrote in the

book: “People always say that I refused to give up my seat because I was tired, but that wasn’t true. I wasn’t so tired physically, because I wasn’t old. I was 42. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.”

Not all of Parks’ final experiences proved positive. In September of 1994, a 28 year-old man broke into their home and robbed and beat her. He was caught the next day, and she said of the attack, with her characteristic grace: “I pray for this young man and the conditions in our country that have made him this way. Despite violence and crime in our society, we dare not let fate overwhelm us. We must remain strong.”

She died on October 25, 2005 at the age of 92 in her home in Detroit, Michigan. Rosa Parks’ casket was placed in the rotunda, being the first woman in American history to lie in state at the United States Capitol, an honor usually reserved for Presidents. Parks was oft-quoted as saying that she didn’t set out that day, over 50 years ago, to make history, but she did. And in doing so, she also changed it. Her legacy is felt every day by Americans of all backgrounds, races, and creeds.

But the struggles for full freedom and justice remain even in America, to this day. So, whenever you and I, in our small ways, remain tired of giving in, remain tired of seeing wrongs prevail...and choose to stand up for justice in our daily world...we’re following in the brave footsteps of our American sister, Rosa Parks.

Tom Owen-Towle  
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