

I Hope We Go Forward

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, July 19, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Romans 8:12-25](#)

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John Lewis has been on my mind and heart since I heard about his death on Friday night. As I've reflected on his life over the last 36 hours, I realize that I've looked to him with a certain level of awe – awe at his commitment to equality that led him to put his life in danger, and awe that his leadership started at such a young age.

He was youngest speaker at the 1963 March on Washington, offering a speech that the elder advisors pressured him to tone down. One change he was pressured into making I find particularly prescient. "In the original version, Lewis opened by boldly declaring SNCC [the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which he help found] wouldn't support Kennedy's civil rights bill, because it didn't go far enough to protect people from police brutality."¹ In the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, we see that the issue hasn't gone away. Before he gave his speech, Lewis' words were "tempered to: 'It is true that we support the administration's civil rights bill. We support it with great reservation, however.'"²

John Lewis, of course, knew police brutality all too well. This image³ is, for me, iconic: John Lewis being beaten by police for walking across a bridge. The day, March 7, 1965, became known as "Bloody Sunday." It was hardly his first experience of violence as the white response to the demand for civil rights.



¹ Gilliam Brockell, "At the 1963 March on Washington, civil rights leaders asked John Lewis to tone this speech down," *The Washington Post*, (posted 17 July 2020; accessed 18 July 2020).

² *Ibid.*

³ Photo from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/17/us/john-lewis-dead.html>

Lewis was one of the original 13 Freedom Riders, the group of Black and white activists who challenged segregated interstate travel in the South in 1961. This is a picture of Mr. Lewis and a fellow Freedom Rider, James Zwerg, after they were attacked. Lewis was “left unconscious in a pool of his own blood outside the Greyhound Bus Terminal in Montgomery, Ala., after he and others were attacked by hundreds of white people. attacked by segregationists in Montgomery, Ala., in May 1961.”⁴

“Mr. Lewis was arrested 40 times from 1960 to 1966. He was repeatedly beaten senseless by Southern policemen and freelance hoodlums.... He spent countless days and nights in county jails and 31 days in Mississippi’s notoriously brutal Parchman Penitentiary.”⁵

What I didn’t know about him until I read some articles about him this weekend was that there was a high personal cost for him.

“Mr. Lewis’s first arrest came in February 1960, when he and other students demanded service at whites-only lunch counters in Nashville.... David Halberstam, then a reporter for *The Nashville Tennessean*, later described the scene: ‘The protests had been conducted with exceptional dignity, and gradually one image had come to prevail – that of elegant, courteous young Black people, holding to their Gandhian principles, seeking the most elemental of rights, while being assaulted by young white hoodlums who beat them up and on occasion extinguished cigarettes on their bodies.’”⁶

It took three months, but the sit-ins were a success, “and Nashville became the first major Southern city to begin desegregating public facilities.

“But Mr. Lewis lost his family’s good will. When his parents learned that he had been arrested in Nashville, he wrote, they were ashamed. They had taught him as a child to accept the world as he found it. When he asked them about signs saying ‘Colored Only,’ they told him, ‘That’s the way it is, don’t get in trouble.’

“But as an adult, he said, after he met Dr. King and Rosa Parks, whose refusal to give up her bus seat to a white man was a flash point for the civil rights movement, he was inspired to ‘get into trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble.’”⁷

Mr. Lewis never stopped getting into trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble. At age 76, he participated in another sit-in. This one was on the floor of the House of Representatives. He and other members of Congress demanded that the then-Republican-led House vote on gun control legislation. This was in a direct response to the massacre at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, called the Pulse. Though that action did not succeed in getting gun control legislation to the floor, it was, in my assessment, more good trouble.

I hear in today’s scripture a call to get into good trouble. “I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The

⁴ Katharine Q. Seelye, “John Lewis, Towering Figure of Civil Rights Era, Dies at 80,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/17/us/john-lewis-dead.html> (posted and accessed 17 July 2020).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's children.... We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free."⁸

I hear in Paul's words the desire for something more, the desire for something still being born, the desire for what Martin Luther King, Jr. called "the beloved community." It is the same desire I hear in John Lewis' call to get into good trouble. It is the same desire I hear in the from young leaders like Greta Thunberg who has now held her 100th #FridaysForFuture strike for climate⁹ calling for meaningful, efficacious action on the climate crisis. It is the same desire I hear in the calls for justice from the Movement for Black Lives and from LGBTQ+ activists. It is the same desire I hear from advocates for people who are unhoused.

Now, when we look at these struggles, when we look at the plagues of racism, the climate crisis, sexual oppression, and economic injustice, it is easy to be discouraged. When we look at how the pandemic has forced us to shelter in place when we want to get onto the streets, it may be helpful to listen to this piece of advice tweeted Congressman John Lewis in 2018: "Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."¹⁰

Like many leaders of faith communities, I've been thinking both about how to be church now in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and about how we will be church when the pandemic is contained and it is safe to gather in person again. As I've done this musing this past week, the sage advice we heard from the Rev. John Dorhauer last week during the Question & Response time echoes in my ears, that we can't truly plan for life after the trauma when we are in the midst of the trauma. So I'm trying not to get specific as I look to the future. Nonetheless, I have reached some conclusions, the most important of which is this:

I hope we don't go back to being church the way we used to do church. I hope we go forward.

And when it comes to addressing the pressing and urgent issues of our day, the issues of racism, the climate crisis, sexual oppression, and economic injustice, I hope we go forward.

Just as we are being forced to find new ways of being the church over the past four months when we haven't been able to gather physically, we will have the opportunity to find new ways to loving our neighbors, new ways of embracing the inescapable reality of our shared reliance on and responsibility to one another. And as followers of Jesus, we know that there is a better way to do so.

⁸ *Common English Bible*. (2011). (Ro 8:18-23). Nashville, TN: Common English Bible.

⁹ Greta Thunberg, <https://www.facebook.com/gretathunbergsweden/posts/1178558659178619> (posted and accessed 17 July 2020).

¹⁰ John Lewis, <https://twitter.com/repjohnlewis/status/1011991303599607808> (posted 27 June 2018; accessed 18 July 2020).

Four years ago, John Lewis was interviewed by Jon Batiste,¹¹ the band leader for the Late Show with Stephen Colbert. I'll let a brief clip – from 8:10 to 9:37 – from the interview serve as the conclusion to this sermon.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCHBi030TMM>

Questions for Contemplation:

- What “good trouble” is God calling you to?
- How can you more deeply embrace the “better way” that is love?

¹¹ Barbershop stories with Jon Batiste and Congressman John Lewis, <https://youtu.be/FCHBi030TMM>, posted 28 November 2016.