

FAITH IN POLITICS  
Peggy Wallace Kennedy  
Dexter Avenue Baptist Church  
March 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2018

Fiftieth Anniversary of the Death of Martin Luther King

Memories are curious things, sometimes hiding behind drawn curtains, shuttered windows, closed doors. Pushed beneath the veil of history – believing what people tell you rather than what you remember. Pushing them aside for convenience, rather than seeking their truths. Closing the doors of what was done or what was said, so you can do it again then claim, “I had no idea.” Soothing the soul into complacency, until one day the past grabs you and never lets go.

Looking back is often the first step of moving forward. Not to repeat the past, but rather for “we shall overcome the past. Not to forget but perhaps to forgive. Recognizing there are moments of humanity and inhumanity, in all of us. Lessons to be learned, here in this Church where a young pastor changed the world.

On Friday, December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1955, my father, Judge Wallace, left the courthouse early. He picked us up from school. We were going to my grand parent’s house in Knoxville, Alabama, not far from Tuscaloosa, but 191 miles from us.

My Grandfather, Mr. Henry, was standing on the porch of his hand made farmhouse when we drove up late into the night.

“Somebody’s looking for you, George.” He said. “Phone’s been ringing all night. They say to call them back whatever the time it is.”

The next morning, Mother shook me awake, seemed like even before sunrise. “You need to get up, we’re going back.”

“We just got here. What’s wrong?” I asked.

“A black woman was arrested Thursday night. And your Daddy thinks there’s going to be trouble.”

“What did she do?” I asked.

“She was riding on a bus in Montgomery and when a white man got on the bus, she would not get up and give him her seat?”

I remember I never thought to ask why she had to give up her seat. But I did not. If Daddy thought it was a problem, then so did I.

They said it was some young black preacher stirring the pot, stepping out of line. It was the first time I heard the name, Martin Luther King.

Perhaps had I been old enough to understand I would have assumed

Daddy was rushing home to stand by the side of Dr. King. After all, Daddy was said to be one of the most dedicated members of the Board of Trustees at Tuskegee Institute.

Civil Rights Attorney J.L Chestnut from Selma, said that Judge Wallace was a fair man. “He demanded that the white lawyers refer to me as Mr. Chestnut and address my clients as plaintiffs rather than “these people.

Attorney Arthur Shores, whose Birmingham home was firebombed, more than once by the Ku Klux Klan in 1963 remembered the times in the early 1950’s when Judge Wallace invited him to have lunch with him in his office because no Clayton, Alabama restaurants served African Americans.

And in 1958 my father would say, “I want to tell the good people of this state as a judge of the third judicial circuit, if I didn’t have what it took to treat a man fair regardless of his color then I don’t have what it takes to be the governor of your great state.”

And then things just changed.

In November of 1988, my husband Judge Kennedy became Justice Kennedy when he was elected to the Supreme Court of Alabama. Shortly thereafter, a playmate of our then ten-year old son, Leigh, asked him “what does your Daddy do?” Leigh thought for a moment before saying, “He does Justice.”

And as to Martin Luther King and Governor Wallace that was the difference.

For, Martin Luther King said. “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice”

However, in 1958, after Daddy lost the Alabama Governor’s race to a viral segregationist, shattering the dreams of his childhood and the singular goal of his life, “The arc of his moral universe was long, but it bent toward power.”

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to Justice. My father, until the twilight of his life, dedicated his life to Power.

Dr. King used his power to fulfill a dream for mankind. Governor Wallace justified his acts to fulfill a dream of his own.

In a career of public service, power or justice, is one of the many choices we must make. And whatever we choose, we will live with that decision for the rest of our lives, perhaps forgiven but never forgotten.

Sometimes, people ask me if I have forgiven my father. Perhaps the better question should be “Have our children forgiven us?”

For, as Dr. King said,

“History will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.”

On April 4th, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King was thirty-nine, Governor Lurleen Wallace was forty-one and Senator Robert Kennedy was forty-two. Bernice King was five, Keri Kennedy was 9 and I was 18.

Within nine weeks, their fathers and my mother were dead.

Dr. King died on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Governor Lurleen Wallace died in her bedroom at the Alabama Governor’s Mansion in Montgomery and Senator Robert Kennedy died in a Los Angeles California Hospital.

We were the daughters of a Nobel Peace Prize Winner, a United States Senator and a Governor of a State all caught up in the devastation of public service. Our parents were too young to die.

Perhaps, it was that common thread that brought us together, when we were much older than even our parents had been.

“Good job” I hope they said.

Perhaps 50 years from now, Keri, Bernice and I will say “Good job” to the grandsons and granddaughters of the movement who have taken our place.

But only if they do a better job than our generation in following the words of Martin Luther King when he said,

“There comes a time a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor favor, but he must take it because his conscience tells him it’s right.