

Final Paper: Hope is a Discipline

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“Hope is a discipline” is a phrase originated by Mariame Kaba that has become the rallying cry of many people who are tired of feeling like they have yet to see change.¹ It has inspired art, reinvigorated those working towards justice, and encouraged people to put the work in, to continue to press on and in. Although this phrase is credited to Kaba, the idea itself of the discipline of hope is one that preceded her. Although not necessarily named as such, it was present throughout the Civil Rights movement, and beyond, in those who saw what others deemed hopeless and continued to work towards lasting change, even as there were countless incidents that could have caused hope to fail; incidents sometimes specifically designed to cause those working towards justice to give up, to cease hoping and in doing so, to cease their work. It is present in those who still continue this work today. This paper seeks to look at the ways this played out during the Civil Rights Movement and beyond, and where this hope stemmed from and continues to stem from.

Hope in the Civil Rights Movement

In many ways, the Civil Rights Movement was founded on hope that, at times, seemed to have no grounds to be legitimate hope. In the face of countless laws and rulings that told people that there would never be equality, in the face of people in power who outright stated “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” hope does not seem to be a logical reaction.² And yet it was present. In looking towards the future, Dr. King used far more “whens” than ifs.” That is to say that for him, the outcome of the Civil Rights movement being one that reflected his dreams was one that he was prophetically stating to be inevitable. It is impossible for this to have been the case without hope. Moreover it is impossible for this to have

¹ The Intercept, The Intercept, March 17, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/03/17/intercepted-mariame-kaba-abolitionist-organizing/>.

² King & Washington, 507

been the case without hope that was held as a discipline, strong in the face of countless events that would have caused those who held hope as a feeling and a feeling only to give it up, and in doing so, give up the work of pushing for justice and equality.

It is easy to hope when things are going well, or even when you have seen a victory or two in the midst of several setbacks and defeats. It is much less easy to hope when it feels like all you have seen is setbacks and defeats, or when the response to victory is simply for people to find other ways to harm and hurt you and your cause. Over the Sankofa journey, and especially the two areas put together by the Equal Justice Initiative, this was highlighted well. The Trans-Atlantic slave trade was banned? In the 50 years following, “an estimated one million slaves were forcibly transferred” during the domestic slave trade.³ Slavery is over? Lynching takes off, with almost 4,400 verified lynchings taking place in under 75 years.⁴ The Birmingham protests seemed to be gaining traction? The 16th Street Baptist Church bombing occurred. Even looking after the big win of the end of the Jim Crow era can be disheartening. The Equal Justice Initiative states that “one in three Black boys are projected to go to jail or prison in his lifetime,” often due to “racial bias and abuse of power wielded by our contemporary criminal justice system.”⁵

Centuries of this, of seeing hope snatched away when its time seems to truly have arrived, would be enough to crush the hope of any people group. No wonder Dr. King wrote in his *A Testament of Hope* that “these words may have an unexpectedly optimistic ring at a time when pessimism is the prevailing mood.”⁶ So where was Dr. King’s optimism, his hope, coming from? Later on he states that people “have no comprehension of the strength that comes from

³King & Washington, 221-222

⁴ Calhoun-Brown, 170

⁵ Mt. 5:39

⁶King & Washington, 19

faith in God and man.”⁷ If your hope gets its fuel from an unshakeable source, it gives you the ability to continue to practice the discipline of hope, even though everything, or most everything, you are seeing tells you you should not have any hope at all. It is this sourcing that turns hope from simply a human discipline into a spiritual discipline. When you know without a doubt that the God of justice and mercy is with you, your hope can become an extension of your faith, strengthening both, and allowing you to hope in the face of seemingly unbeatable odds.

The Church and Hope

Throughout the Civil Rights movement, the church was a center for hope and activism. Author Richard Wright stated that ““Our churches are where we dip our tired bodies in cool springs of hope, where we retain our wholeness and humanity despite the blows.”⁸ How did this work? First of all, the church, and the faith of those within the church, provided a personal bolstering of hope for those within it. People could come to church on Sundays and hear stories of times when God’s people were facing invincible odds, times when it looked like there was absolutely no hope, and yet they prevailed; God came through for them. This effect is reflected in Dr. King’s statement that “Those of us who call the name of Jesus Christ, find something at the center of our faith, which forever reminds us that God is on the side of truth and justice. Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumph of Easter.”⁹ Believers were also reminded to rely on God when it seemed like all was failing, when they had no more reservoirs of their own hope to turn to. Dr. King reminded people of this multiple times. In *The Strength to Love*, he tells his readers that “God is able to give us interior

⁷King & Washington, 578

⁸ September 19, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fKD4Msh3rE>.

⁹King & Washington, 298

resources to confront the trials and difficulties of life.”¹⁰ But one of the most poignant examples of holding to hope in the face of absolute tragedy and despair that would seem to be a justifiable reason to give up hope entirely comes from his eulogy for three of the four girls killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. Within the eulogy Dr. King said that “God still has a way of wringing good out of evil. History has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive... so, in spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair”¹¹ Within the acknowledgement that evil happened, that times were bleak, Dr. King still called for listeners to look beyond the moment and continue to hope.

Above and beyond the personal effects of bolstering hope the church had on those who attended, it was the organization of the church that created opportunities for hope, especially hope in the face of adversity. Alison Calhoun-Brown states that, beginning during slavery, “churches developed and contained civil society for [the African-American community]. In church, one could find politics, arts, music, education, economic development, social services, civic associations, leadership opportunities, and business enterprises. One could also find a rich spiritual tradition of survival and liberation.”¹² This played out throughout the Civil Rights Movement. First, the church was often used as a staging ground for those who were going out to march or protest. It was a place to gather, in multiple cities and towns. Most significantly is the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, or the SCLC. Following the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. invited 60 ministers to gather at Ebenezer Baptist Church

¹⁰ Kim Chandler and Jeff Martin, “Survivors Emerge from Wreckage after US Storms Kill 9 People,” AP News, January 13, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/tornadoes-disaster-planning-and-response-selma-alabama-climate-environment-7f9d8545a4ba04e3d398579b052d36dd>.

¹¹ For the Life of the World, For the Life of the World (Yale Center for Faith and Culture, June 2, 2020), <https://for-the-life-of-the-world-yale-center-for-faith-culture.simplecast.com/episodes/my-anger-gods-righteous-indignation-willie-jennings-response-to-the-death-of-george-floyd-FXkkWh9b/transcript>.

¹² Deric A. Gilliard, *Living in the Shadows of a Legend: Unsung Heroes and "Sheroes" Who Marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Decatur, GA: Gilliard Communications, 2003), 155.

with the goal of “form[ing] a regional organization and coordinat[ing] protest activities across the South.”¹³ The SCLC was involved in many crucial moments of the Civil Rights movement, and it is fair to say that without the SCLC, the outcome of these crucial moments may have looked much different.

In some ways, one can look at the movement to protest non-violently as an ultimate expression of hope, mostly sourced from faith in Jesus. Calhoun-Brown states that “the message of non-violence was constructed by black church leaders” which is shown by the fact that the SCLC’s “mandate was to coordinate nonviolent direct action activities through churches in various locations,” and that many considered the NAACP to be “the black church on its knees.”¹⁴ In the face of systemic violence that began hundreds of years ago, the “logical” action might be to rise up violently. It is certainly an understandable impulse. To respond to violence with intentional non-violence, to “turn the other cheek” while still moving forward (quite literally in the case of the Selma march and many others) is something that has to come not only from inside a person’s heart and mind, but from a greater foundation.¹⁵ Dr. King wanted the non-violent movement to go beyond people’s actions or inactions. Jesus taught that actions overflow from the heart, and knowing this, Dr. King stated that “Nonviolent resistance... Avoids, not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of spirit. The non-violent resistor not only refuses to shoot his opponent, but he also refuses to hate him. At the center of nonviolence stands the principle of love”¹⁶

13 “Selma City Alabama.” United States Census Bureau . Accessed April 20, 2023. <https://data.census.gov/all?q=Selma%2Bcity%2C%2BALabama>.

14 “Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration.” Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Accessed April 20, 2023. <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/museum>.

15 Jose Vazquez, “Domestic Slave Trade,” Equal Justice Initiative, June 3, 2022, <https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-domestic-slave-trade/>.

16 Jennings, Rosa

Although the positive effects of the church on the Civil Rights Movement, and the hope of those within it, is truly significant, the effects of the church were not always good. The church was also a center of disappointment for many in the Civil Rights Movement. In his *Letter from a Birmingham City Jail*, written in response to “eight prominent liberal, Alabama clergymen, all white,” who wrote an open letter to Dr. King opposing nonviolent resistance, Dr. King touched on this feeling.¹⁷ He stated “I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say that as one of the negative critics, you can always find something wrong with the church. I say it as a Minister of the Gospel, who loves the church; who is nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings, and will remain true to it, as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.”¹⁸

This disappointment has been echoed by many since, but especially in the last few years. Jemar Tisby’s 2019 book *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* traced the ways the American Church, specifically the White church, not only compromised with racism, but actively condoned and collaborated with it and its perpetrators. It called its readers to reckon with things that the white church has traditionally been blind to, in some cases deliberately and willfully. Then in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, many churches experienced significant upheaval. Some because their pastors and leaders acknowledged events and started speaking about systemic racial issues for the first time, some because their leaders ignored events and continued on as normal. For many, the lukewarm response of the church was another disappointment in what seems like a long line of disappointments in the area of racism. They felt that the church held great power, but did not use

17 Martin Luther King and James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1986), 314

18 King & Washington, 314

it in a manner that reflected the love Jesus had for all people, the love that believers are also called to have. Dr. King stated that “power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love, correcting everything that stands against love.”¹⁹ This is the kind of love that many have looked for in the church over the course of history and have failed to find. In many ways, it is this lack of love paired with justice within the church that has caused so much of the current organization for justice to be from secular sources and organizations, rather than the church.

Hope Today and Beyond

Hope as a discipline is not something that was solely a practice of earlier times. Even today, when speaking with or hearing from those who were active in the Civil Rights movement, one can hear the discipline of hope still being practiced. An example of this comes from J.T. Johnson, a Civil Rights activist who is currently 85 years old, spoke about all the work that he wanted to do in and for Selma.²⁰ Selma, Alabama is a city that is economically depressed, with higher than average rates of unemployment, low income, and high percentage of people living under the poverty line.²¹ In January of 2023, it was hit by a large storm, and the downtown and surrounding areas were ravaged by a large tornado, sustaining “severe damage.”²² When visiting in late February, not only was the damage from the storm still readily visible, but in some areas it looked as though the storm had just come through, with roofs covered in tarps and trees strewn across driveways and properties. The way Johnson spoke about the work that had to be done, and

¹⁹“Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror” (Equal Justice Initiative, 2017), <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>.

²⁰ “SCLC History,” The All-New National SCLC, October 3, 2018, <https://nationalsclc.org/about/history/>.

²¹ King & Washington, 88

²² National Civil Rights Museum, see appendix

the way he wanted to be a part of that work did not sound as though he felt that this was an unwinnable fight, an overwhelming burden. But rather, he spoke as if it felt like an opportunity, a place to continue to serve. This is hope as a lifelong discipline in action. In the face of things that could easily be the cause of despair, instead there is deliberate hope, paired with plans for action and change.

In his interview with Evan Rosa of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture in the wake of George Floyd's death at the hands of the police in 2020, Dr. Willie Jennings also takes up the rallying cry of hope as a discipline, rather than simply a feeling or a sentiment. It is one that he states that his "parents and people" taught him.²³ However, as a believer in Jesus Christ, he takes it one step further. When discussing hope and action in the face of systemic racial violence in the United States, Jennings states that not only is hope a discipline, it "requires anger," an anger "connected to the righteous indignation of God."²⁴ Hope requires an anger that does not enter hatred but rather, through our connection with Jesus, points the person who hopes to the changes that can be made. This is the hope that not only is a discipline in and of itself, but in Jennings view, will also discipline us. In a world that all Christians can agree is clearly not what God intended it to be at the moment, we look to Jesus. When Jesus saw things that were not as they ought to be, he was angry, but not hopeless. In a way, anger is an acknowledgement that you think it can and should be better. Hopelessness is a form of apathy, and anger is not an apathetic thing.

In a dialogue with Dr. Miroslav Volf via the Yale Center for Faith and Culture in 2014, Dr. Jennings takes this one step further. Here he states that "joy is the currency" that allows

²³ Allison Calhoun-Brown, "Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 33, no. 02 (2000): pp. 169-174, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1049096500060911>, 169.

²⁴ King & Washington, 504

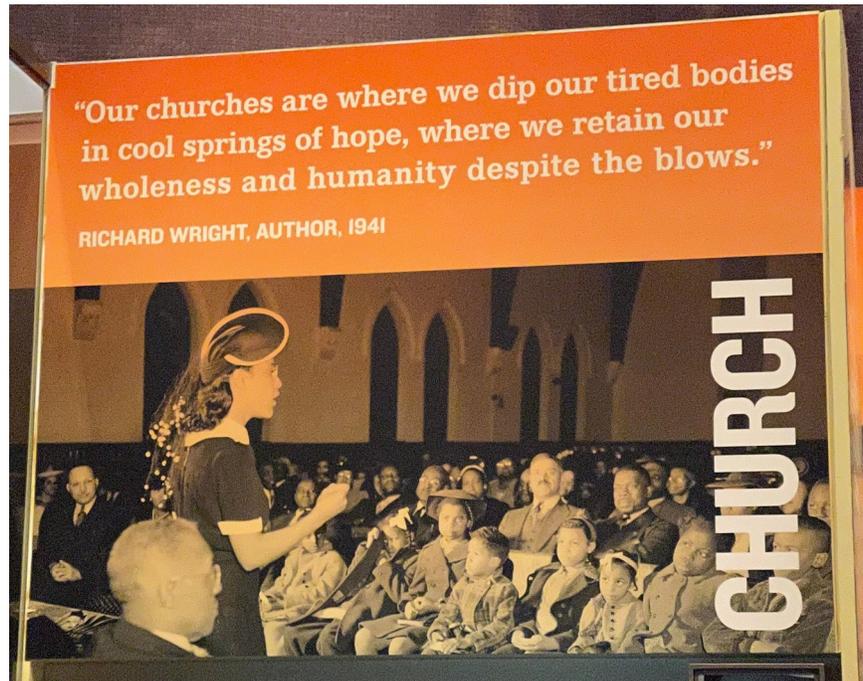
people to “want to hold on to life even when there’s very little that makes sense.”²⁵ He states that historically, joy has been segregated as society has been segregated. He calls for people to use joy, integrated joy, to help “think beyond segregation.” This combination of God’s righteous anger and God’s joy flowing through us will allow for hope to continue to flow, even in the face of events that could cause us to give up and give in to hopelessness, and in doing so cease to do the work of justice that the Lord has called all believers to do. Hope is a discipline, but contrary to what those who are not believers would tell us, it is not a discipline that we can keep on our own. We require the work of the Holy Spirit. We require faith. Dr. King wrote that “at the center of the Christian faith is the conviction that in the universe, there is a God of power who is able to do exceedingly abundant things in nature, and in history... the ringing testimony of the Christian faith is that God is able”²⁶ It is only with our eyes fixed on Jesus, fixed on the God that we know can do “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine,” that we will be able to maintain the discipline of hope beyond our limited human capacity.²⁷

25 Eph. 3:19

26 George C Wallace, (January 14, 1963), <https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/voices/id/2952/>.

27 King & Washington, 289

Appendix



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