

LESSONS FOR MASSACHUSETTS FROM MISSISSIPPI

Some people may think that I am concerned about this so-called civil rights issue because I am primarily interested in politics or social reform. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am interested in civil rights, in race relations, in call-it-what-you-will, because I am interested in people, and ever since my childhood in China, where I saw friends of mine beaten with gun butts and old women fearful of the police and strangers starving on the streets, ever since then, I have been interested in people, especially people who are being hurt; this is the only reason that I can see for supporting this movement today. People are being hurt. They deserve our help, and their persecutors deserve our loving, but firm concern. I am preaching on this subject this morning because I think that we can help those who are being hurt in Mississippi, and I hope we can learn something about our own situation here in Boston and give our attention to this, and do something about our own backyard too.

I went to Mississippi upon the request of both the OMA's Department of Social Responsibility and the National Council of Churches. In the fall of 1963 after the summer civil rights workers had returned to college, severe reprisals were taken against those Negroes who had supported the civil rights effort. They lost their jobs; they were threatened and beaten; their churches were bombed. It was at this point that civil rights leaders realized that a year-round effort was necessary, and they began to appoint permanent leaders in the troubled areas. The National Council of Churches began a program that they called the Delta Ministry. In four towns in Mississippi, they placed four resident clergymen with their own homes and offices. These resident clergymen guide and advise visiting clergymen who come from all parts of the country to Mississippi to assist the civil rights movement there and to learn more about the actual situation.

What do these visiting clergymen do while they are there? Or rather, what did I do while I was there? I assisted the young civil rights workers with canvassing and voter registration. I attended a few meetings and one rally. I talked to members of the Negro community to learn more about their problems. I talked to some white people, not only in order to express my own views, but also to learn their views. This is, in effect, what I did during the week that I was there. I was mostly walking, talking and — especially — trying to listen. I was one of over 800 church-related workers who had come to Mississippi during the past year — for as short a time as five days or as long a time as five weeks. You might be interested to know that well over a third of these men came from three denominations — the Episcopal Church of America, the Presbyterian Church, and the United Church of Christ.

I landed at the Hattiesburg, Mississippi, airport on a rainy afternoon and called the Liberty Cab Company, as I was instructed. In half an hour, a dusty 1958 Plymouth drove up and took me to the offices of the Minister's Project on Mobile Street; this, incidentally, is the main street for Negro business in Hattiesburg. In the office I was greeted by a short, heavy, red-haired man with a jovial manner and a very high voice; he was Bob Beech, the resident director of the Hattiesburg project, and he was the complete antithesis to my picture of the social reformer. I still think of him as "Friar Tuck." Bob Beech had graduated from McCormick Seminary in Chicago in 1960 and had served a Presbyterian church in Illinois for three years before he took this job. He had now lived with his family in

Hattiesburg for more than a year; during this time he had received countless telephone calls threatening violence and had seen a cross burned on his front lawn. He had been attacked in a hardware store, burned away from local churches, and jailed because of a check that bounced. After a year of this, he was still going strong.

Bob Beach gave us instructions on what we were to do and showed us through our quarters. The office was a converted store with tables and typewriters at the front, a partition in the middle, and mattresses and a shower in the rear. Local citizens, Negroes, of course, had reached these quarters for the visiting ministers. Written into the cement floor of the shower was the following message: "We thank you for helping us to gain our freedom - Ruby Lee." We ate our supper that day, as we did almost every meal, in a restaurant two blocks away called the Green Door, run by a man and his two daughters, Hazel and Carrie. By the way, my companion for the week was Walter Fress, a United Church of Christ executive from California in his late fifties. He hoped to encourage young men in his district to come and thought he ought to come first and check over the project.

It is important for you to understand one thing. Hattiesburg is, by Mississippi standards, a moderate town. There have been no dynamite bombings and no recent cases of flagrant police brutality. The Klan does not dominate the town, nor does the White Citizen's Council seem to exert undue influence. You see, the town was founded in 1862, after the reconstruction days and, therefore, does not have this myth-memory about how horrible things were, when the Negroes were in power. It is a city about the size of Birmingham (50,000) with an annual budget of 4.5 million dollars, of which they spend 72 per cent on (you guessed it) schools. The town had doubled in size since 1940 and is still growing. It has 160 industries in town, most of which are related to lumber products, food products and fabrics. The two largest industries, Hercules Powder Company and Reliance Apparel Company, employ 2,300 persons. There are about 15,000 people employed in the city. There are 70 churches in town, 15 public schools and one parochial school, and two institutions of higher learning, the University of Southern Mississippi and William Carey College, a Southern Baptist college. The weather averages 66 degrees throughout the year; in December and January, it sometimes goes below freezing.

If you were to visit a friend of yours in Hattiesburg, you would find it a pleasant and easy-going town. The streets are broad and lined with trees. The balmy climate is delightful, and you would enjoy a friendly welcome from townspeople, neighbors, bus drivers and store clerks alike. If you were to read the papers, you would find no reports of violence or any dissatisfaction on the part of the Negroes. If you spent an hour talking to Howard Pyne, Secretary to the Chamber of Commerce, you might consider moving your business to Hattiesburg. You might even see Whites and Negroes working together on a highway project, although the white man would probably be driving the machine and the Negro would probably be wielding the shovel. But perhaps, after spending a week or two in this pleasant city and enjoying the genuine hospitality of your hosts, you might well wonder what all the fuss was about -- that is, if you are a white man.

But if you are a Negro in Hattiesburg, it is a very different story. There are at least two out of three chances that you live in a ramshackle house through which run the rats, the wind, and the cold, and it does get

beat. The street in front of your house is not paved and never has been. In most neighborhoods the refuse runs through open ditch sewers. If you're smart, you have a little garden out back, where you raise collards, turnips or carrots. If you want to go downtown, you take a bus and sit where you like, but when the bus moves into a white neighborhood, you move to the back of the bus. "If you're white, you're right; if you're black, stay back." I asked the secretary in our office, "What would happen if you sat up front?" She answered, "Well, you'd get spoken to -- told to go back -- or maybe get arrested if you didn't." One morning Walter and I were waiting for a bus at the same corner with a Negro woman. When the bus came, we stepped back to let her on first. She waited for us to get on, but we stood firm, and finally she got on. "That's fine for you," a friend of mine told me later, "because you're going to be leaving town. But the next time that woman tries to get on that bus, she may get the door slammed in her face." That's what it's like to be a Negro and ride a bus in Hattiesburg, which is, remember, a moderate town with moderate people.

If you're a Negro, you can shop almost anywhere in downtown Hattiesburg, but you can only eat lunch at the Woolworth lunch counter, and you may not feel too comfortable there. If you go to the Owl Drug Store, the manager will tell you, "It is not our policy to serve niggers." You won't get into Lee's or any other restaurant, and you will not be allowed to sit in the orchestra of the appropriately named Rebel Theater.

There are a few good jobs for Negroes in Hattiesburg. You can be a teacher, if by some miracle you did well enough in school and somewhere get enough money to go to college. You can be a businessman in the Negro district, a TV repairman or a carpenter or a barber, but you will never make any money running a restaurant; there are too many of them already. There are three or four Negro machine operators at the ceramics plant, but in all likelihood, you will work with your body -- pushing carts in the factory, sweeping floors, digging, pounding, or what have you.

Suppose you want to vote? What do you have to do? You go to the court house and sign up to take the registration test. You then wait a month. During the two weeks after you sign up, your name is published twice in the local papers with your address. If your employer is scanning the paper for "smart niggers," who are trying to vote, he will come across your name. Fourteen days later, if you still want to, you take the voter registration test. You must be able to repeat verbatim any one of sixteen different sections of the Mississippi state constitution, and give what the registrar will call a reasonable interpretation of it. You then wait thirty-three days, and then you must contact the court house to find out if you have passed the test. You will not necessarily lose your job, if you register to vote; but the thought that you might lose your job or that you might be subject to violence may very well keep you away from the registrar's office in the first place. Or, if you have tried to register four and five times like John Connor and still fell, you may begin to get a little tired and decide that it's hopeless.

It is not hopeless, and it is not impossible, but it is very, very hard. In the next year, almost 300 Negroes have successfully registered to vote; a year ago there were only 22 Negroes registered in all of Forrest County. Now 3 per cent of the eligible Negro voters are registered; 10 per cent of the eligible white voters are registered. Let me put the figures a different way. In the fifth Congressional district, there are 96,000 eligible voters; 43 per cent of these are Negroes, yet Negroes comprise only 3 per cent of the total registered voters. In one county, Lamar, in the fifth Congressional district, there are no registered Negro voters.

But statistics cannot tell you the story of what it is like to be a Negro in Hattiesburg, and I'm sure that I as a white man cannot give you a very good picture, but I can show you some people, and you can see what discrimination does to people. You can see it in Doug Smith, a bright young boy who was kicked out of his Negro high school by the Negro principal two years ago, because he was encouraging his fellow students to work for the movement. Although he is exceptionally intelligent, Doug could never get into college now without some kind of training in a prep school, which, of course, he cannot afford. Negroes from Hattiesburg simply do not go to college, and most of them do not consider the possibility of going to college. Doug would like to go, but he heads the local civil rights organization now and must work on that. He has a lot of courage, an engaging personality and at eighteen, an ulcer.

Or how about Betty -- the girl with a disfiguring skin disease and a hunger for attention and affection, which has brought her two illegitimate children so far? She spent a year in the county mental hospital; the wonder is that she ever got out.

Or what of the woman who cleans the infirmary at the University? She was coming home one night and boarded the bus with a child on one arm and a bag of groceries in the other. A heavy man stood in the aisle blocking her way to the back of the bus. The driver called to him, "Boy, let the lady pass." The man turned around, looked at her in surprise, and said, "Why, she ain't no lady; she's a damn nigger," and the driver answered, "You let her by anyway." The woman told me, "I cried all the way home with my broken heart." To be a Negro in Hattiesburg means to live with this kind of indignity.

And what of the niggers? What of Pastor Ridgeway, who was jumped by a man with a knife, because he was getting too "smart" and telling his people to register? What of Clarence, the young barber who has the second chair at one of the shops, and is scared to death of being caught for the rest of his life in Hattiesburg. What of Randy who was recruited all the way from Trenton, N. J., for a job in Hattiesburg, and was laid off a week after he arrived? What of the Negro farmer who always calls his wife when he starts for home after an NAACP meeting, so that she'll know when to expect him -- or not to? What of the young children who run to school every morning at 8:30 for an education that will put them almost nowhere in this fast-moving world? What of the young bucks who hang out at the street-corners, jobless, listless, hopeless, boasting what they'll do if somebody

tries to push them around, and anxiously eyeing the passing police cruiser? What of those people? When you look in their faces and see their hatred for you because you are a white man and it is your race that has blighted their life -- you can see a little bit of what this is all about. I am not saying that discrimination alone is responsible for their fate. Poor whites in Mississippi are also hit by the same forces of poverty and mismanagement and indifference, but to be a Negro means to be hit in a special and almost irrevocable way.

How do the whites in Hattiesburg see this problem? Let me say at the outset that some, a few, are genuinely and deeply troubled over the injustices visited upon the Negroes of their community. A handful have actually visited the office of the Minister's Project on Mobile Street; another handful have actually made a contribution to the cause. But if these people come out openly in support of the movement, or even show some shred of sympathy for it, they will be forced by social pressure and exclusion to move from the community. A rabbi who voiced sympathy for the movement is taking a new synagogue in the North. A psychology professor who played a tape of Negroes discussing civil rights, was asked to leave the university.

Walter and I went to talk to a sociology professor at the University. Walter took the lead.

"We're concerned about the racial situation here in Mississippi and wondered what you as a sociologist thought about it."

Answer: "People who claim to be objective come up with different answers."

Walter: "Do you think things here are getting better?"

Answer: "That's an awful big question."

Walter: "What do you think about the civil rights legislation?"

Answer: "What do you mean by civil rights?"

A colleague came in to the office next door, and the professor opened the door between the two rooms. Finally, we realized that he simply was not going to discuss this issue with us. He was not even going to argue with us.

I could see a bit of what it means to live in a closed society. There is no open discussion upon this issue. Here in Massachusetts, we have differences and sometimes striking differences among ourselves, but, thank God, we are free to discuss and argue out our differences. The state of Mississippi has a case of paranoia on this problem. They believe that they are being persecuted by Northern newspapers and Communist agitators and trouble-making niggers and that oppressive, power-hungry Federal monster in Washington. The problem is the Communists, or the niggers, or the unfavorable publicity, or the outsiders or the Federal government, but the problem is not in Mississippi. If the outsiders and the government would leave, then everything would be all right. The white moderate is by no means an evil person, as he sometimes is portrayed. But his idea of doing

right is to give the Negro better opportunities; he does not understand that what he must do is to give all citizens equal opportunities -- and equal rights. Being nice to your janitor and passing out baskets at Christmas time and inviting the Negro choir into your church to sing for you surely does not answer the Negro's cry for justice and equality. I do not expect to see perfect equality for the Negro in Mississippi in my lifetime any more than I expect to see perfect equality for the Negro in Boston. But I do expect to see something that I do not see now -- Southern whites fighting for the civil and political and economic rights of their fellow Negro citizens. When that day comes, the outsiders can begin to leave.

I visited two churches in Hattiesburg and conversed with the organist in one and with the minister in the other. The churches were huge, with larger sanctuaries and parish facilities than many I have seen in downtown Boston. The sanctuaries, which seat well over a thousand, are filled for both the morning and the evening services every Sunday. Sunday School teachers, in addition to their Sunday teaching time and to their home preparation, spend every Wednesday evening at the church for further religious instruction. Many people in these churches tithe. There is a dedication and loyalty to the church among these people, and this dedication is real, and this loyalty is good. They are good -- but they are tainted with the same sickness which infects the entire community with fever and malaise.

A Negro may not worship in these churches. You, of course, they employ Negro janitors and they treat them very well; both the minister and the organist told me so. But the church has nothing to say about injustice in the public life. That, see, that's a political issue -- that has nothing to do with religion. And a man with a dark skin may not praise God within the doors of their sanctuaries. In theory, the church praises the Father of all men, and, in actuality, they worship the old white man with the sword.

He asked the minister how he connected religion with this issue. He said, "I believe that we are all created by God -- and that Christ died for all of us -- and I believe in his teachings -- and especially compassion." To this man, compassion means passing out baskets at Christmas time and being kind to his janitors. But his compassion does not extend to these people, when they suffer from injustice -- or else he cannot afford to admit that to two visiting Northern ministers. At any rate, whether he feels it or not, he does nothing about it, because if he did say anything, he would probably lose his church. This man kept saying to us, "It would be better if the outsiders left Mississippi, and let the good people of Mississippi take over. We can't afford to be associated with these outside groups; they've tied our hands. We cannot do a thing. But if they left, we could." I cannot take this seriously. The church's hands were tied, and the church's mouth was gagged a long, long time before any "outside" group ever came into Mississippi, and at this stage of the game, after a week in Hattiesburg, I heard of no white individual and no white group and certainly no white church which would dare to speak up for the Negro. The church is popular. It is successful. It does much good work, but it is silent on this issue of morality, and the

silence of the Southern churches on this issue has been deafening. One day -- after I returned, I heard on television a white Southern minister preach at the dedication of a Negro church rebuilt after a bombing by a Southern organization called Concern. The man spoke out versus violence and injustice. It was inspiring to hear him.

Let me close with three warnings:

1. It is dangerously easy to become an expert on other people's sins. We can do more to help the Negro who is living in the ghettos of Roxbury or Dorchester than we can do for the Negro in Mississippi. We can, of course, always give money to the Mass Freedom movement. We can maintain open neighborhood policies in our town. More important, we can try to maintain constructive personal relationships. You can join the program whereby a family in Roxbury and a family in Roxbury adopt each other, and visit each other. You can become a tutor to help one of the 20,000 native-born illiterates in the Boston area, many of them Negroes, and help one learn to read, for these people can learn probably only with the special help. If you are interested in this, speak to Dorothy Duquet or myself. We can work in our own back yard, but this does not mean that we can ignore our responsibilities in Mississippi. It is not a question of "either-or;" this is a question of "both-and."

2. It is dangerously easy to be prejudiced against the Southern white. If you really believe in the dignity of man, you believe in the dignity of the Southern white also and that means you believe that he has a conscience and is, perhaps, genuinely troubled about the grievances of his fellow citizens, who are Negroes. Because there has been so much public criticism of the South, he feels defensive and unjustly maligned. We need more understanding and communication between the North and the South. Perhaps we could institute a great program of letter-writing between people in the same walks of life in the North and South, and give each other a chance to express himself and learn the other's point of view.

3. Finally, it is dangerously easy to say, "Who are we to point the finger at Mississippi? Who are we to meddle in their affairs? The Bible will handle this matter. After all, you can't change human hearts by legislation. You cannot legislate morality. You cannot make people love each other by passing a law."

No, you cannot. But you can stop them from hurting each other by passing laws. You can make sure that they meet each other with fairness, if not with affection, by passing laws. I have not heard anyone argue for abolishing all of our laws pertaining to theft, burglary and embezzlement on the grounds that five thousand years of laws against stealing have failed to stop greed and covetousness. Laws cannot stop greed; but they can discourage stealing. Laws can't stop prejudice; but they can discourage discrimination.

The church is interested in love as well as justice, but it must remember that it is much harder for people to love each other in an unjust society than in a just society. There can be genuine love between people who treat each other as equals. There can never be genuine love between people who are divided into a so-called superior and inferior race. I submit

that we cannot love a creature or creature child of God if we put him on the back of the bus -- we give him the most menial job and deny him the right to participate in our government, which claims to be representative. Ultimately, it is a matter of religion, and I cannot see how we can honor God as our creative Father, if we dishonor his image in some of his children whose color of skin or particular creed or personal attributes we may not like.

"God is not my father in particular, or any man: Father (horrible assumption and madness), or, he is only Father in the sense of father of all, and consequently, only my father insofar as he is father of all. When I hear someone or hear that God is his father -- it is not he who loses out on. For then I have no father."

There has been progress during the past ten years. It is not tremendous progress, when you compare it to the century of inroads and exploitation and abuse, which has been heaped upon the head of the American Negro, but it is progress, real progress, and we can be thankful. But we must remember that this progress did not happen by chance or accident. "Time" did not automatically bring progress, nor did the people who said, "We must move slowly," and then settled back into the swing seat on their Saunders. Progress came because people worked -- because many people worked very hard. Progress came because real people spent real tears and real sweat and real blood for this cause. Progress came because thousands of schoolkids and housewives and millionaires gave pennies and dollars and checks to raise money for bail and to rebuild churches. Progress came because they wrote to the President or their Congressman or the FBI or their local newspapers, and because they sent telegrams during crises, and because they collected canned peaches and old suits and typewriters. Progress came because lawyers spent their vacations down South, and because college kids, white and black alike, lived in Alabama and Mississippi during June, July and August -- because they walked the dusty streets of the Negro neighborhoods and passed out leaflets and asked people for votes and made telephone calls and turned the crank of the mimeograph machine and sang freedom songs and at the freedom schools they taught the Negroes to be proud of their history, their sufferings and even, by God, and I mean by God, the color of their skin, and they did all this when there was no assurance of victory. Progress came because some whites and many, many Negroes moved to the front of the bus and sat at the lunch counters and picketed on the main streets and marched before the court house and sometimes were beaten up the head and kicked in the groin and smashed to the curb by firehoses and attacked by dogs and then were arrested for disturbing the peace, and endured the indignity of their confinement with dignity. Progress came because some Southerners were willing to endure the pain of changing their views and their way of life. Progress came because people like Medgar Evers and Ricky Schwerner are this very day willing to risk their lives in order to help Negro citizens of the South obtain something like the fullness of life. Progress didn't just happen by accident. Time, the ticking seconds of the clock, didn't bring progress. Progress came because people worked, and we should be profoundly grateful for this tremendous work that has been done, and grateful to the people who have labored to bring this work about, and we should be grateful not merely for this collection of individuals, but for the spirit of God witnessed in the midst of their work and saying that this country has a mission, and was destined to be a light of

Freedom for a country's people and their world. We can be grateful that they have decided to be our country's mission.

There is something that you can do this morning, if you wish. You may make a contribution to the Unitarian-Universalist Freedom Fund, which will form a revolving bail fund for imprisoned ministers and civil rights workers. The need for this is great and will continue for a long time. Even now a friend of mine, Ira Blalock, has been held for five days in a concrete bunker in Selma, Alabama, and you know that there are hundreds like him just in Selma alone, and you should know that there will be hundreds more like them in the future. I ask you to give whatever you like and please enclose it in the small envelope provided for this special fund. Give a nickel, give a dollar, give a generous check, give whatever feels right to you, but do help us if you can.

This movement is no crackpot flash-in-the-pan gimmick of a few malcontents. This movement is part of our nation's destiny, for it aims to help our country fulfill its mission -- to be a beacon of freedom, a light to the confused, the struggling and the oppressed peoples of the world. It is our privilege to help this movement -- to be part of history. Let us do so with gratitude and with reverence and with hope and trust in our great nation's future. So be it.