

INTRODUCTION OF ROY WILKINS

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METROPOLITAN BAPTIST CHURCH

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IT IS A GREAT PRIVILEGE TO PRESENT THIS LEGENDARY HERO OF THE NEGRO REVOLUTION TO A MEMPHIS AUDIENCE. HE IS A STUDY IN THE ACHIEVEMENT OF CHARACTER. AND HE HAS WRITTEN HIS NAME WHERE OTHERS HAVE SELDOM BEEN TRACED. HE WAS BORN IN ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI IN THE LUSH ATMOSPHERE OF THAT ST. LOUIS WOMAN WITH HER DIAMOND RINGS, AND GREW UP IN ST. PAUL; BUT NEITHER ST. LOUIS NOR ST. PAUL CAN CLAIM HIM. HE BELONGS TO THE UNIVERSE AND ALL CREATED MANKIND. *is his brethren*

I KNEW HIM WHEN HE WAS A YOUNG MAN STANDING ON THE VERGE OF LIFE WITH THE FAIR GREEN MEADOWS STRETCHING DEWEY AND UNTRODDEN BEFORE HIM AND AMBLED WITH HOPE AND BOUNDED BY SHINING PEAKS THAT HIS BRAVE AND AMBITIOUS SPIRIT PANTED TO SCALE. HOW BEAUTIFUL WAS HIS YOUTH. HOW BRIGHT IT GLEAMED WITH ITS ILLUSIONS, ITS ASPIRATIONS AND ITS DREAMS.

I REMEMBER THE TIME WHEN I FIRST MET ROY WILKINS. CHANCELOE OWENS, A BRILLIANT YOUNG MAN WHO STARRED HIS DAY AND GENERATION, CALLED ME FROM KANSAS CITY ONE MORNING AND SAID HE AND ROY WOULD ARRIVE ON THE AFTER-NOON TRAIN. ROY WILKINS HAD BEEN A REPORTER ON THE KANSAS CITY CALL, A WEEKLY NEWSPAPER. HE HAD BEEN CALLED TO NEW YORK TO JOIN THE STAFF OF THE N.A.A.C.P. THAT WAS BACK IN 1934. HE AND CHANCELOE OWENS CAME TO TOWN AND WE SAT BY MY FIRE LONG INTO THE NIGHT TALKING ABOUT THE PROBLEMS OF RACE AND RELIGION. THAT WAS AT A TIME WHEN PREJUDICE ROSE LIKE GORY MONSTERS FROM THE DEN OF RACE AND RELIGIOUS HATE. THAT WAS AT A TIME WHEN THE SOUTH HAD WRAPPED ITSELF IN A CONFEDERATE BLANKET AND WAS BEING CONSUMED IN RACIAL FERVOR. IT WAS AT A TIME WHEN JIM CROW WAS LIKE A BALL OF FIRE AND SKIES ONE SHINING SOFT SAPPHIRE. IT WAS AT A TIME WHEN MOST NEGROES EMPLOYED CLOWNISH ANTIQUES, HEAD SCRATCHING AND HISTRIONIC CAJOLERY AS A SURVIVAL TECHNIQUE.

I DIDN'T KNOW THEN THAT WHEN I PUT HIM ON THE TRAIN BOUND FOR NEW YORK, I WAS SAYING GOODBYE TO A MAN WHO WOULD PLAY A LARGE PART IN CHANGING ALL THIS SUBJUGATION WHERE THE GROWTH OF NEGRO MANHOOD WAS SEALED UP AND MADE INFERTILE BY PREJUDICE. I DIDN'T KNOW THEN THAT I WAS SAYING GOODBYE TO A YOUNG MAN WHO IN LATER YEARS WOULD STEP ON THE ADVANCING WAVES OF CIRCUMSTANCES AND STEP BY STEP WOULD ADVANCE HIMSELF TO ONE OF THE HIGHEST PINNACLES OF EARTHLY GRANDEUR AND RENOWN. A YOUNG MAN WHO HAS SINCE THEN SHOWN SUCH RAW COURAGE UNDER SUCH TRYING CIRCUMSTANCES, WHO HAS DEMONSTRATED THE COURAGE TO PERCEIVE THE TRUTH, THE COURAGE TO EMBRACE THE TRUTH, THE COURAGE TO EXECUTE THE TRUTH.

WENDELL PHILLIPS, THE GREAT ABOLITIONIST ORATOR WAS ASKED BY AN INDIVIDUAL WHY DIDN'T HE GO TO THE SOUTH AND MAKE SOME OF HIS SPEECHES AGAINST SLAVERY. HE REPLIED, "YOU DON'T HAVE TO GO TO HELL TO FIGHT THE DEVIL." AN INDIVIDUAL ONCE WROTE A LETTER TO THE DEVIL. HE ADDRESSED IT IN CARE OF THE POST MASTER OF PHILADELPHIA. ROY WILKINS HASN'T EXACTLY BEEN TO HELL, TO FIGHT THE DEVIL, BUT HE HAS BEEN TO MISSISSIPPI TO FIGHT THE WHITE CITIZENS' COUNCIL THAT HAS HAMMERED PUBLIC OPINION INTO AN IDOLISTIC WORSHIP OF WHITE SUPREMACY. HE HAS BEEN TO ALABAMA WHERE NOT EVEN THE POET WHO WROTE OF THE DIVINE QUALITY OF MERCY COULD SPIN UPON THE LOOM OF HIS GENIUS HIS STORY OF SELMA, ITS TRAGIC GRANDEUR AND ITS IMPASSIONED BEAUTY. HE HAS CARRIED THE TORCH OF RACE AND RELIGION TO THE CAPITAL OF HATE AND OPPRESSION NOT IN HATRED, BUT WITH A DETERMINATION TO BREAK THE SHACKLES OF SECOND CLASS CITIZENSHIP.

I FEEL WILKINS KNEW THAT NO TYRANTS EVER COULD FOR LONG STARVE OR TORTURE AVERAGE MEN OUT OF THAT DREAM TO BE FREE. HE KNEW THAT IT'S MORE THAN A DREAM, THAT IT'S THE AIM OF MAN, THE PURPOSE OF HISTORY, THE DESTINY TOWARD WHICH ALL MEN HAVE MARCHED UNDER HIS ADMINISTRATION.

THE SUPREME COURT DECISION OF '54 WAS HANDED DOWN COMMITTING JIM CROW TO THE TOUNGLESS SILENCE OF THE DREAMLESS DUST. WHEN THE CASE WAS FIRST PRESENTED TO THAT AUGUST TRIBUNAL, SEGREGATION WAS A WAY OF LIFE. AT THAT TIME I DIDN'T THINK IT COULD BE CHANGED. NEITHER DID YOU. NEITHER DID FRANKLIN; NEIGHTER DID ROOSEVELT; NEITHER DID HARRY TRUMAN; NEITHER DID DWIGHT EISENHOWER, BUT ROY WILKINS THOUGHT THAT GOD COULD CHANGE IT AND WOULD SHOW HIM HOW. HE KNEW THAT THE JOB COULDN'T BE LEFT

UP TO THE WHITE MAN TO LEAD THE FIGHT FOR FIRST CLASS CITIZENSHIP. HOWEVER, HE WAS CONSCIOUS OF THE NEED OF WHITE ALLYS DEDICATED TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL MEN SHOULD BE FREE AND EQUAL. SO HE HAS EXTENDED A HAND AS ANCIENT AS THE SUN AND ALL RACES HAVE COME TO SWELL THE RANKS AND TODAY UNDER HIS LEADERSHIP THE N.A.A.C.P. CLAIMS A MEMBERSHIP OF MORE THAN 500,000.

MY FELLOW CITIZENS, I GIVE TO YOU THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE, THE ROVING ADVOCATE OF THE LINCOLN BELT; WHO LIKE AN ARMED WARRIOR AND A PLUMED KNIGHT HAS MET THE FORCES OF REACTION, BUT HAS NEVER LOWERED HIS ARMS TO DEFEAT. OUT OF THE NIGHT THAT COVERS HIM, UP FROM THE PIT FROM POLE TO POLE. I THANK WHATEVER GODS MAY BE FOR HIS UNCONQUERABLE SOUL. IN THE FELL CLUTCHES OF CIRCUMSTANCES, HE HAS NOT WINCED NOR CRIED ALOUD. UNDER THE BLUDGEONINGS OF FATE, HIS HEAD IS BLOODY, BUT UNBOWED. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE HONORABLE ROY WILKINS.