

“Get into Good Trouble”

Genesis 29:15-28, Romans 8:26-39, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Part I of VII in the sermon series:

“For Such a Time as This:

Seven Lessons for Living Through Pandemic Times”

Based on Esther 4:14

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, July 26, 2020, 8th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 12, dedicated to the memory of Arlene Reynolds who passed to eternal life on July 6th, to John Lewis and C.T. Vivian who passed to eternal life on July 17th, to Rev. Earl Fritz on his 93rd birthday and in celebration of 65 years of ordination and to Earl and Pauline for 68 years of marriage, to Lennon Trautman who was born to Angie and John Trautman and sister Charlie on Thursday, July 23rd and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Since Congressman John Lewis entered eternal life on July 17th, I have been reflecting on 30 minutes I spent one-on-one with him on September 30th, 2015. After working for over six months to set up our meeting, I flew into Washington DC on the last day of sabbatical in 2015 to meet the iconic Civil Rights leader. Thanks to my friendship with Congressman Bobbie Rush, I was granted 30 minutes, one-on-one with one of my greatest heroes – and as we are seeing across the nation and the world as well - one of America’s greatest heroes.

We ended up speaking about many things – family, life, Congress and of course, the Civil Rights Movement. He said his life was defined by *“getting into good trouble, necessary trouble. Good trouble always redeems the soul America.”* He said, *“I was arrested 40 times in the 1960s. I have been arrested another six times as a member of Congress. I imagine it will happen again (he said with a laugh). But every time I was arrested, I was getting into ‘good trouble.’ I was challenging unjust laws, unjust practices, and immoral practices.”* He continued, *“my civil disobedience came from my faith. Like Jesus, I was laying down my life for others. I was always ready to die. I didn’t always realize it then, but that non-violent civil disobedience freed me so I could really live a life of peace.”*

Faith in God, in Jesus Christ and yes, faith in humanity, was a constant theme in our conversation. I asked John, *“when you were beaten down on the Edmund Pettis Bridge on Bloody Sunday, March 7, 1965, how did you get up?”* He answered, *“Faith.... I had faith in God that He would pull me through. Through all my beatings, imprisonments, and my work in Congress it is faith that saves me, faith that moves me forward. Faith! It is always faith.”*

When talking about his late friend and colleague in the Congress, Congressman Bobbie Rush of Chicago, told me last week, *“John was*

indeed such a transcendent person. He was a humble yet remarkable friend and person.” Transcendent and humble. When he faced the challenges of his life – including growing up in the poverty of a sharecroppers’ family in rural Troy, Alabama in the 1940s and 1950s, he was able to face life as it came to him and embrace it – move beyond the obvious challenges of poverty, racism, and hate. He was able to embrace the fullness of faith, patience, study, truth, peace, love and reconciliation which he talks about in his book, *“Across that Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change.”* John Lewis faced what came at him and marched through it to victory. John Robert Lewis was truly transcendent.

How does a person do that? How does a person face the ugliness and the awfulness of life and overcome all of it? Moreover, how do we learn from them and embrace their lessons of grace and peace under fire? How do we do this?

Let me get even closer to each of you - when time of hardship comes to you, personally or professionally, how have you responded to the challenges, questions, decisions, and obstacles placed before you? For all the children and teens listening today, think of this: when you have “bad things” happen to you or others around you, how do you react? Do you respond by doing a “good thing” – doing the right thing – or do react and respond with striking back and creating more bad actions?

It is my hope and prayer that you will you - like John Lewis - stand up, speak out, and make a difference in this world. I hope you make good trouble, necessary trouble!

I have to tell you - It’s a lot to ask of any person, especially one who is young to stand up, speak out, and do the right thing. But we have many great examples of how to do this in the Bible. One of my

favorites is Esther - Queen Esther. As a young woman Queen Esther saved the entire Jewish community in Persia from extermination.

Listen to her story - one of the truly great scriptural measures of how to respond in the face of a crisis. Esther was only one of two Bible books named for a woman - the other was Ruth. Parenthetically, Esther is a book in which God is never mentioned by name, making it one of only two books in Hebrew Scripture in which this happens (Ecclesiastes is the other one).

Esther became Queen of Persia in 479 BC. Unbeknownst to King Ahasuerus, Esther was a Jew. Although Esther never deceived her husband about her religious faith, she never spoke of her love and allegiance to God and to her people. Her Jewish heritage didn't seem to matter until the arrogant and evil Haman used his power to bring an edict of death to all Jews.

Esther's Uncle Mordecai, who has raised Esther as his daughter since her parents died, steps forward to appeal for help from his adopted daughter. Mordecai says to Esther, *"Don't think that just because you live in the king's house you will be the one Jew to get out of this alive. If you persist in being silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else, but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made to be queen for such a time as this?"* (Esther 4:13-14).

In other words, this is the moment God has given you to step up and step out and lead. Will you embrace this moment? Will you be the leader God has called you to be? Or, will you shrink from your responsibility and hide in your silence?

These are powerful questions that hits each one of us and can indict anyone of us in the hour in which we are needed. **God knows the answer. But, DO we know the answer?**

Like Esther, when we are called upon to step up and speak out, do we do it? Or do we turn and walk the other way? Do we Shrink Away? Do we Move Away? Do we Hide in Silence? Do we Avoid, Evade and Disappear?

The power of this story is that God will find a way to Save God's people.

This paradoxical truth both stings and reassures. Anyone of us can walk away from leadership and saving those who need our help. But God won't walk away. In this story, God will not walk away from the salvation of the Jews. If Esther fails to respond on behalf of her people, God will find another way!

In the face of this challenge, Esther gets into good trouble! She chooses to save her people – using her own style and plan. She prays to God and asks for direction and deliverance. From the depth of her faith and conviction, Esther devises a plan which includes dinner parties and exposure of the evil Haman's plan to destroy the Jews. When Haman's plan is uncovered, Haman is hung. Mordecai is elevated to a trusted leader. The Jews are saved.

In the generation that follows, Esther's son, Darius becomes the King who returns the Jews from exile in Persia to return a home to Holy Lands. Darius oversees the rebuilding of David's city and Solomon's Temple. In the end, Esther not only saves her people from extermination; she is the heir to their return from exile to their homeland. By stepping up in a crisis time, Esther saves the day!

This story calls to all of us - *for such a time as this*. Throughout time, God has used the gifts of common and uncommon people in times and locations through which and in which they have impacted history. Like Esther, some of these people are known to us, for their stories are written down. Others, we do not know. All of them responded to God's calling at "*such a time as this*" in their world.

John Lewis once said, *"If we want to build a loving community, we cannot shy away from responsibly to lead. The church must be the headlight not the taillight. There is too much suffering in our world and I don't think the forces of history will be kind to us if we fail to speak up and speak out."*

In a Pandemic Time Such as This, how do you and I respond? What lessons can we learn from Esther and John that we can apply to our lives in this time – right now?

Sociologist Dr. Rayshawn Ray wrote a piece for the Brookings Institute this week on five lessons learned from John Lewis. Here are applications that can help us now as we are in pandemic times.

These five lessons can help all of us get into good trouble.

First, Vote, always (I will return to this in four weeks...) *"Your vote matters. If it didn't, why would some people keep trying to take it away? #goodtrouble"* Lewis sent this tweet on July 3, 2018. It highlights his life's work—equitable voting. One major part of the Civil Rights Movement was Black people gaining the right to vote. This finally occurred with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. But the *Shelby v Holder* Supreme Court decision in 2013 essentially gutted the Voting Rights Act and paved the way for widespread voter suppression and gerrymandering.

This is why it is imperative for Congress to act swiftly to pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act to ensure equitable access to the polls. Congress must honor Lewis' legacy and ensure an equitable participation in the democratic process. As Lewis noted, *"The vote is precious. It is almost sacred. It is the most powerful non-violent tool we have in a democracy."* Call your Congressional leaders now and make sure all Americans have equitable access to the polls in November and forever.

Second, you are Never too young to make a difference. Esther was in her early 20s when she acted. John Lewis was 17 when he got started. At 23, John was the youngest person to speak at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963. Elder civil rights leaders tried to quiet his words. Lewis was critical of the Kennedy administration and the slowness by which broad scale legislation change was occurring at the federal level. Lewis also critiqued civil rights legislation for not addressing police brutality against Black people.

Imagine how this moment in the Movement for Black Lives may be different today had elder Civil Rights leaders trusted and listened to John Lewis – and let him say these important words that never were offered.

Lewis' youth gave him a vision for a more transformative society that was mostly socialized out, and in some cases beaten out, of older leaders. John Lewis' legacy teaches us that age is nothing but a number and young people have to be the change they want to see by pushing and forcing older people for equitable change. The truth is that older people are often socialized in the current arrangement of society and cannot fully envision a radically different world. We always need the vision of youth to force us to move forward.

Lewis stated, *“I want to see young people in America feel the spirit of the 1960s and find a way to get in the way. To find a way to get in trouble. Good trouble, necessary trouble.”* Young people can and should push for transformative change and hold us accountable to it.

By the way, John Lewis had a tremendous youth following right up to the end of his life. His graphic novels *“March 1, 2, 3”* were used as required reading in 15 universities across the country for entry level freshmen. I recommend that you read these award-winning graphic novels. He was the most sought-after Congressional speaker on college campuses right up to the end of his life.

Third, Speak truth to power. *“Speak up, speak out, get in the way,”* said Lewis. He taught us the importance of speaking up and speaking out. We have to be willing to speak up about injustice, always, no matter the costs. Lewis stated, *“When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something.”* This motto should apply in all aspects of our lives. Lewis epitomizes it and encourages us to not be silent. He was adamant about supporting free speech, but he was also adamant about condemning hate speech. *“I believe in freedom of speech, but I also believe that we have an obligation to condemn speech that is racist, bigoted, anti-Semitic, or hateful.”*

Fourth, Become a racial equity broker. John Lewis personified the transition from a political activist to a politician. He was a **racial equity broker**. A racial equity advocate speaks up and speaks out, stands in the gap, and sits at the table to advocate for people who cannot advocate for themselves. There is a saying — *“If you are not at the table, you are on the menu and someone is eating you for lunch.”* Shirley Chisholm said, *“If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.”*

Lewis realized that to make transformative change, he had to be at the table and often bring his own chair.

Once at the table, John realized that he needed to help draft the documents that got discussed at the table. This led him to becoming an elected official and a racial equity broker to alter, deconstruct, and restructure the laws, policies, procedures, and rules that inhibit racial equity.

Fifth and finally, Never give up. When Lewis was elected to Congress in 1986, one of his first bills was the creation of a national museum to chronicle the history, culture, and successes of Black Americans. The culmination of this bill was passed in 2003 and opened in 2016 as the **National Museum of African American History and Culture**. Lewis taught us persistence. He taught us that when a person has transformative ideas, they should not taper those ideas. Instead, they should push those ideas until others get on board. Simply because change is slow does not mean change agents have to move slowly towards it. Lewis was a lightning bolt for equity, social change, and social justice. We must continue his legacy, never forget history, pursue equity, and get in good trouble.

I don't want to hear anyone say – I am not a Queen. I am not a Congressman. I can't do this. Every single one of us can make good trouble. No excuses.

In today's Gospel lesson in Jesus points to the mustard seed as the smallest seed growing into a great tree. I want you to apply this parable to getting into good trouble. Plant your mustard seed in a place where you can make a difference. Then water it. Care for it. Let it grow!

Get into Good trouble. Necessary trouble. In time, like Esther and John, you can save the soul of your nation.

May God bless and keep you now and always. Amen.