

A Saint Like You and Me

John 13:31-35

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Good morning.

First thought: today's Gospel reading from John may be one of the most important messages in the Bible on Christian daily living.

Second thought: if one wants to think about the application of scripture to life today, it really helps to have an example.

So, this morning, I want to talk about seeing John's message from 2,000 years ago in action in the life of an Episcopal saint who was alive 26 years ago.

Yes, that last statement does mean the Episcopal Church is still making new saints. With a small "s".¹ The particular saint I want to talk about lived right here in Northern Virginia, at Lake Barcroft: Thurgood Marshall, whose commemoration day on the Episcopal calendar was last Friday, May 17.

Let me tell you a bit about Marshall. He was born in Baltimore in 1908. His great-grandparents on both sides were slaves.

He attended Lincoln University, a historically black university, in Pennsylvania. Initially, Marshall struck his fellow classmates as unserious. In fact, a party animal. One classmate, the poet Langston Hughes, described him as "rough and ready, loud and wrong."²

But something happened to Marshall in his first year of college. Something that transformed him from party animal to literal saint. Because, by his second year in school, he participated at a sit-in protesting segregation at a local theater.

In 1927.

¹ "The Calendar in the Prayer Book contains a number of names. Of these, the term 'saint' appears only a handful of times and always in connection to a limited set of people who appear in the New Testament." From the *Introduction to A Great Cloud of Witnesses: A Calendar of Commemorations* (New York: Church Publishing, 2016), p. 174. So, to make this simple for Episcopalians, the only capital "S" Saints are figures mentioned in the New Testament. But there are many, and a growing number, of lower-case "s" saints recognized in the Episcopal Church. Read more about this at extranet.generalconvention.org/staff/files/download/13068.pdf#page=174.

² Joseph Nazel, *Thurgood Marshall: Supreme Court Justice* (Los Angeles: Melrose Square Pub, 1993), p. 57.

When he was all of 19.³

Awakened to the injustice of apartheid, Marshall wanted a career in the law. But the University of Maryland Law School was closed to blacks. So, he enrolled in Howard University. When he graduated, the first thing he did was help sue the University of Maryland to force it to admit blacks to the law school.

He won that case, at age 28. This launched his leadership of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. Marshall and his colleagues then relentlessly attacked in courts the Jim Crow system of discrimination. He won 29 of 32 cases.

But even though his team won, they did so on technicalities. What was needed was a Supreme Court ruling that racial discrimination *itself* was unconstitutional.

Marshall finally found the winning argument in the area of public education.

The NAACP brought cases in five different states challenging school segregation. You know the name of the lead case: *Brown versus Board of Education*, from Kansas.⁴

Another of the five cases was here in Virginia. It involved high schools in Prince Edward county.⁵ ⁶ The high school there for black students was in part tarpaper shacks with pot-bellied stoves and privies, and without a gymnasium, cafeteria, or auditorium. Plus, the roofs leaked.

When the Supreme Court issued its ruling in 1954, Marshall's victory was complete. The Supreme Court unanimously agreed that racial discrimination violates fundamental American constitutional values.

Almost everyone here this morning has grown up in a country where racial discrimination by the government is forbidden. But it was not always so. We have Thurgood Marshall and his team to thank for that.

The story of the fight to end school segregation, and Marshall's role in it, is told in a powerful book by Richard Kluger entitled *Simple Justice*.⁷ Kluger explains the incredible hardships the NAACP lawyers, most of them African-Americans, faced in the Jim Crow South. They were refused lodging, turned away from restaurants, and forbidden to use public restrooms. They couldn't even buy gasoline.

³ Gregory S. Parks, ed., *Alpha Phi Alpha: A Legacy of Greatness, The Demands of Transcendence* (Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 2012) passim.

⁴ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

⁵ *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, Civ. A. No. 1333; 103 F. Supp. 337 (1952).

⁶ And the other cases were *Briggs v. Elliott* (South Carolina), *Gebhart v. Belton* (Delaware), and *Bolling v. Sharpe* (Washington, D.C.).

⁷ Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976).

Even worse were the verbal, and in some cases, physical threats, false arrests, and even death threats. In 1952, as one example, the Ku Klux Klan encircled the hotel where white NAACP lawyers were staying in Orlando with trucks and torches from dusk to dawn.

Marshall's wife said of him in this period, "He's aged so in the past five years... This work is taking its toll of him." His longtime friend William Hastie wrote, "He drove himself... beyond the limits of human anatomy. He was at the point of exhaustion..."⁸

Marshall and his team helped hundreds of people directly, most of whom were strangers to them before Marshall and his colleagues became their lawyers. And 60-plus years later, we know that *millions* of Americans have benefited from their work and courage.

So, Marshall's story raises a question. What inspires a person to endure hardship and worse in order to help others? How does one find the strength to overcome one obstacle after another to lift *strangers* out of privation and oppression?

I think we can find the answer in today's Gospel reading from John. In today's reading, Jesus instructs the disciples, "I give you a *new* commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."⁹

Jesus claims this is a new commandment, but didn't God say the same thing in Leviticus? In Leviticus 19:18, God gives Moses the injunction, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." And in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus calls on us to love neighbors and enemies.¹⁰

But in John, Jesus may be giving us a slightly different thought. Leviticus and the Synoptic Gospels imply an individual responsibility. In John, it seems to me, that Jesus is calling on us to love one another *in community*.¹¹

In community.

Not in isolation.

Not as individuals.

Something that requires us to recognize the people all around us.

Our shared humanity.

A focus on loving *action*, not loving *feeling*. By *helping* one another.

⁸ Ibid., p. 561.

⁹ John 13:34, emphasis added.

¹⁰ Matthew 5:44; 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 6:27, 35

¹¹ My point adopted from Raymond Brown in *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 613-614.

Love each other, Christ says, “Just as I have loved you.”

Now, Thurgood Marshall was a devout Episcopalian. He knew and understood the Bible, and biographers agree that his belief and faith were powerful motivations for his actions on civil rights. He heard, and understood, and answered, the call in John chapter 13. It gave him the courage and determination to turn the darkness of racial hatred into light.

That *same* inspiration is available *to all us of* when we read John.

Indeed, I think one reason the Episcopal Church continues to recognize new saints is to allow us to see Christ’s instructions in action *today*. To *see* the power of loving action. To *see* the result of acting as members of God’s community.

Now, you may hear people say, “Episcopal Church saints are not ‘real’ saints, because, where are the miracles?” Well, I don’t know about you, but *Brown versus Board* is miracle enough for me!

We are asked by the Church to study the lives of saints for a reason. I encourage you to spend some time this week thinking about the lesson of the life of saint Thurgood.¹²

The life he lived, the things he did, *made* him a saint.

What does his life mean for you and me? Actually, we have all known this answer since we were children, because the first hymn many of us learned taught us the answer:

[T]he saints of God are just folk like me
and I mean to be one too.¹³

In closing, let us pray the prayer appointed for remembrance of the life lived and accomplishments of Thurgood Marshall, civil rights champion, and first African-American member of the Supreme Court:

Eternal and gracious God, who blessed your servant Thurgood Marshall with grace and courage to speak the truth:

Grant that, following his example, we may know you and recognize that we are all your children.

Amen.

¹² Small case “saint Thurgood,” in keeping, as explained carefully above, with Episcopal tradition.

¹³ Episcopal Church. *The Hymnal, 1982: Service music: according to the use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1985), 243.