

## **Redeeming the Soul of America? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Promise of the Engaged Scholar**

Charles Marsh, October 9, 2012

*Marie Griffith*

Welcome everyone, it's so nice to see you all here. This is our first time to use this new, beautiful Umrath Lounge for our purposes. I'm Marie Griffith, I'm the director of the John C. Danforth Center for Religion and Politics, and welcome to our first public lecture of this academic year. It's great to see a lot of new faces here from different institutions, so welcome to you all. Some of you may know that since we last had public events we've now moved into this building, so I hope at some point you'll take a moment to see our new headquarters just across the hall here, in the lovely, beautifully renovated Umrath Hall. I want to make sure you all know that our next lecture of this year will feature George Will, from the Washington Post, among other places, and he will speak on December 4<sup>th</sup> in Graham Chapel. It's an evening lecture, he will be speaking at 7pm. Let me also announce that following today's lecture we're going to have an informal reception there at the back of the room, so please feel free to stay for refreshments and conversation with our speaker and with other folks here as well.

It is my great pleasure now to introduce Charles Marsh, who is professor of religious studies and director on the project of lived theology at the University of Virginia. Prof. Marsh is a graduate of Gordon College, Harvard Divinity School, and the University of Virginia, where he earned his PhD in 1989. The project on lived theology is a research community that seeks among other things to understand the social consequences of social beliefs. It's really much more than that, and I hope and expect he will tell us more about this during his lecture or the subsequent discussion. Prof. Marsh is a prolific writer and the author of a range of works at the intersection of cultural, historical and theological inquiry, from his first scholarly book, "Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of his Theology" which Oxford University Press published in 1994, to his most recent book, which was co-authored with his lifelong friend and the civil rights activist John Perkins, a book called "Welcoming Justice: God's Movement Toward Beloved Community," which was published by InterVarsity Press in the fall of 2009. So already you see the range of figures and of topics and themes in Prof. Marsh's work. He's also done a favor for all of us born and bred southern evangelicals by considering the religious and moral paradoxes of his own southern Protestant upbringing, and in particular the complex ways theological commitments and convictions came into dramatic conflict in the Civil Rights Movement in the American South. The religious beliefs and social practices of ordinary people of faith illuminated a new way of writing theology for him, the first fruit being "God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights" published by Princeton University Press in 1997. This was a groundbreaking book that many of us in the field of American religious history teach over and over again, and it won the 1998 Grawemeyer award in religion. His memoir, "The Last Days: A Son's Story of Sin and Segregation at the Dawn of a New South," published by Basic Books in 2001, is a coming-of-age account of a minister's son growing up in a small Mississippi town that was home to the white knights of the Ku Klux Klan. His 2005 book, "The Beloved Community: How Faith Shaped Social Justice From the Civil Rights Movement to Today," also published by Basic, developed a new interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement based on Martin Luther King Jr.'s remark that, "The end of the movement is not the protest, the end is not the boycott; the end is redemption, reconciliation, and the creation of beloved community." In 2007 Prof. Marsh wrote a theological analysis of the Christian right's support of the presidency of George W. Bush entitled "Wayward Christian Soldiers: Freeing the Gospel from Political Captivity." Again, Oxford University Press published that one in 2007 and it was excerpted in a variety of places, and it's a book that really shares a great deal in common with Senator

Danforth's own book, "Faith and Politics." So we have a lot of shared things there. Marsh is the recipient of many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship in the Creative Arts, and he has served at the American Academy of Berlin. The book he's currently writing is called "Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," which will be published by Knopf shortly, in 2014. He's also a member, and a very valued member, of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics national advisory board, so we're very grateful for his service there. His lecture today is titled "Redeeming the Soul of America? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Promise of the Engaged Scholar." Please join me in welcoming Charles Marsh.

*Charles Marsh*

Thank you so, so much for that lovely introduction Marie, and thanks to all of you here at the Danforth Center for making my visit such a lovely time and for all of your hospitality in this beautiful weather, and thanks to you for coming inside on such a lovely afternoon! I'm happy to be back here, this is my second visit to Washington University and to the Danforth Center. I invite you to join me this afternoon in a journey through two lives. My lecture will run about 50 minutes, so that's warning to you; I've already handed out some chocolates, and I'm out of the chocolate so there's nothing else to do there. We'll have some time at the end to pick up any questions or loose threads or anything about these two figures that aren't covered in my lecture.

So, "Redeeming the Soul of America?—with a question mark—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Promise of the Engaged Scholar." During a seminar at Harvard Divinity School in 1967 in religion and politics, the theologian and visiting professor Helmut Thielicke was asked about the popular criticism that the social movements of the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement in particular had produced merely symbolic solutions to the prescient issues of the day. "At most the door has been opened only a crack," one student said. The response of this German dissident and radical pastor took the class off guard. "So what?" he said. "What do you have against symbolic solutions?"

Thielicke went on to say that while we grasp onto the big programmatic searchlights and try desperately, even courageously, to light up the road a long way ahead, the prospect of living with a symbolic solution may well remind us that despite all of our best efforts, we shall never bring about the Kingdom. What a fascinating exchange and provocative introduction to our considerations this afternoon. Redeeming the Soul of America? Martin Luther King Jr. and the Promise of the Engaged Scholar? What an absurdly ambitious title, I realized shortly after sending it to Marie—even with the question mark. And besides, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King Jr. are not two figures commonly associated with symbolic measures. These two theologian-pastor-activists reckoned with the fierce urgency of the here and now, one contesting the hellishly real structures of Southern segregation, and the other the monstrous Nazi state. They sought redemption in its most vivid and concrete forms. What, then, do we make of this tension between the floodlights and the flickering lamps that illuminate our next step, between the striving for the promised land and the wilderness wanderings where we usually end up? As I have made the journey from a childhood in the segregated South, the child of a Southern Baptist minister, a child who came of age, as Marie mentioned, during the most violent years of the CRM, during the reign of a white Christian terrorist organization of the 1960s, as I have tried to deal with the haunting and perplexing questions of the time, I have found that the most compelling questions have come, most often, when I cleave to stories, and always my thoughts have turned to the lives and—if you will—the witnesses of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and MLK, not only as exceedingly helpful guides in navigating the complex realities of our own era, but as exemplars of engaged scholarship, who offer us fresh and exceedingly generous ways of thinking about faith and its social energies. So in my talk this afternoon, I wish to try to

connect their stories, in what I hope are inspiring and generative ways. At some point at the end, we might have a closer look at the phrase that titles this lecture and remember the question mark.

Most of you know something about the life and legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. You've seen a lot of attention to recent biographies and the press. Less familiar perhaps, than the story of his involvement in the resistance and the conspiracy against Hitler, are his journeys and encounters in America—in 1930 and 31, and then again, briefly, in 39. The former will figure more prominently into our considerations this afternoon. In the late summer of 1930, Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to Union Theological Seminary in NYC as a visiting student and a postdoctoral fellow. He arrived in Manhattan as a straight-arrow academic whose star was on the rise. He was a 24 year old privat docent at the University of Berlin, the great theological faculty in Europe, with two doctoral dissertations under his belt, ready for a lifetime of academic accomplishments and the rich rewards of the German guild. A lack of self-confidence was not then or ever a problem for this golden child of the Berlin Brunevald. But when he left New York ten months later, he left with dramatically transformed ideas on social engagement, faith, and historical responsibility. In his definitive biography, 1100 pages I think with notes, Eva Hart-Baker describing this return to Germany said, simply, "Something had happened." Well, let's ask what happened, briefly.

The best place to start is to take a brief inventory of Bonhoeffer's life on the eve of his first visit to America. What did he expect of this year? Looking at his notes and his letters written on the eve of this journey, it seems clear that he expected the time to be another chapter in his very charmed life. As I said, he was a 24-year-old theological prodigy who had, in his second dissertation, sought to deconstruct the entire tradition of Kantian transcendental subjectivity. What could he possibly learn from a country where people fashion their religion the way they order the car from the factory, according to tastes and preferences? However, there is a hint of I think more intimate hopes found in a somewhat unlikely source, and indulge me briefly in this. This comes from an essay on choosing texts for preaching, penned during a comprehensive exam at Berlin. Bonhoeffer says that one promising theme for a sermon series is God's path through history and the church of Christ, and the first text he mentions for this series is Hebrews 12:1, the verse that culminates the saga of faith from creation to the first martyrs in Chapter 11: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." The verse seemed to have deep importance for Bonhoeffer, though it would take some months before he understood how. And indeed, five months after he had been in America, as he experienced a new country, an unfamiliar culture, the strange and to him sometimes very exotic landscapes of American life—he wrote to a friend and said, "I am searching for a cloud of witnesses." In the twelve courses he took at Union Theological Seminary as a Sloan Fellow, Bonhoeffer focused on philosophy of religion, theology, and ethics, and an educational context and theological climate altogether different from the sort he was accustomed to in Berlin. Suffice it to say, he was underwhelmed by the theological world encountered at the great Protestant Seminary of the Upper West Side. "Nothing, nothing but religion and ethics," was one of his more generous remarks. And Bonhoeffer's observations at the end of the year are no less critical than on that day at the start of the fall semester, 1930, when he couldn't believe it, he recoiled in outrage as fellow seminarians started giggling during his presentation on Martin Luther's great doctrine on the justification by faith. "It has come to this," Bonhoeffer complained, "that the seminary has forgotten what Christian theology in its very essence stands for. The principal doctrines here are in utter disarray. In America," he said, "it would appear that it is possible to enter the ministry without having a clue what one believes." Yet amidst all this hand-ringing over theology, Union-style—or American-style—we should not lose sight of the fact that Bonhoeffer, in Berlin, had already begun to feel boxed in by institutional constraints and the lack of a vital connection between the classroom and the world, complaining loudly and often as you'll see in his notes about the German academy. In one entry in his journal he writes in his almost illegible longhand, "I'm supposed to be

intellectually creative while grading these excruciatingly dumb seminar papers?” He says many other things as well; I think the larger context of Bonhoeffer’s agitated remarks suggest that he had grown impatient with a certain insular, and for him suffocating, preoccupation in his academic life. He travelled to America in search of a cloud of witnesses, for some relief from the Lutheran melancholy of the north German plains.

Bonhoeffer had never met anyone quite like Reinhold Niebuhr, the great dramatist of theological ideas in the public arena, as Larry Rasmussen has nicely said, for whom probing analysis of the contemporary situation and existential engagement in its needs and conflicts appeared more important for theology than parsing sacred doctrines. Among a faculty of nearly 40 at this flagship institution of American Protestantism, no one better represented American social theology than this indefatigable teacher, still only two years away from his pastorate in inner city Detroit. In the concept of Christian realism, which Niebuhr was actually working out in his lectures and seminars the year Bonhoeffer was there, 1930-31, would be the most widely quoted term from his 1932 landmark book “Moral Man and Immoral Society,” Niebuhr reminded modern believers—and all persons, believer or not—of their thick entanglement in the broken and indeed sinful, he would remind liberals, structures of the world. Christian Realism began with the sober affirmation that there will never be any escape in historical existence from the contradictions in which human nature is involved. Niebuhr’s honest assessments of power and justice struck a chord with people searching for a way beyond liberal idealism and Victorian quietism, beyond Utopianism and resignation. And Bonhoeffer took courses both semesters with Niebuhr, and while he enjoyed the courses—especially Niebuhr’s “Ethical Viewpoints in Modern Literature,” in which Bonhoeffer was introduced to the writings of James Weldon Johnson, Booker T Washington, WEB DuBois—he found Niebuhr’s views positively bewildering. One day after class he approached his professor and asked, “Is this a seminary or a training center for politicians?” But Niebuhr was equally perplexed by the Lutheran prodigy from Berlin—and as you know, Niebuhr was not one to shy away from confrontation. When Bonhoeffer asserted in a term paper that the God of guidance could only be known from the God of Justification, Niebuhr responded that “Your doctrine of grace is far too transcendent. It has no bearing on the concrete here and now.” Niebuhr pushed Bonhoeffer to think more honestly, more realistically about the ethical content and social significance of the doctrine of justification by faith. “In making grace as transcendent as you do,” Niebuhr told Bonhoeffer, “I don’t see how you can ascribe any ethical or practical significance to it. Obedience to God must issue in actions which can be socially valued.” Bonhoeffer never acknowledged a theological debt to Niebuhr, although the two would become very good friends over the next decade, and Niebuhr would offer, as many of you know, to Bonhoeffer asylum in New York in 1939, and would visit in Germany on a number of occasions. Nevertheless, I think it is correct to say that Bonhoeffer was moved and inspired by the spirit of Niebuhr’s public theology, in particular by a theologian who engaged the social order with ultimate honesty and civil courage—terms that Bonhoeffer later used—who insisted that the scholarly enterprise required maximum attention to race, politics, literature, issues of social justice, citizenship, and the complex realities of the day. More influential, though, I think than his exchanges with Niebuhr were experiences in and outside the classroom with representatives of what we might call the great American organizing tradition; I refer here to the tradition of progressive Protestant thought characterized by the commitment to piecemeal social reform and the disciplines of community building and organizing. Richard Rorke, the philosopher, called this the reformist left in his Harvard lectures published in the superb volume “Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America.” But, bless his heart, Prof. Rorke allowed not a word of these men and women’s deep religious convictions. Since Niebuhr’s arrival in Union in 1928, a cadre of social reformers had turned to him for moral and financial support, and time and again, Niebuhr offered it graciously. In this marvelous book, by Tony Anthony Dubar,

called “Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959,” this lay historian—who now writes mystery novels based in New Orleans—says that “without Niebuhr’s inspiration and practical assistance, these movements probably would not have existed or succeeded to the extent that they did.” Niebuhr’s encouraging presence and logistical expertise are pervasive in the letters and exchanges of the intentional communities and the progressive social and congregational initiatives flourishing in this remarkable fertile period of American Protestant thought. Bonhoeffer’s knowledge of this American organizing tradition came directly through his studies with several great teachers at Union, including Harry Ward and Charles Weber. Firsthand participation in their classes in local church-based organizing, and Bonhoeffer’s knowledge of this tradition deepened in friendships with classmates at Union, many of whom after finishing their degree—some before finishing—dispersed into backwater towns and urban areas and strange hamlets throughout the Deep South to pursue their social ministries. Unfortunately, in this afternoon’s talk, I can’t possibly do justice to these largely forgotten scholars. But I would recommend for your fall reading two books, in addition to the above cited *Against the Grain*, one by Frank Adams called “James A. Dombrowsky, an American Heretic,” and another by the late David Nelson Duke, a wonderful book called “In the trenches with Jesus and Marx.” David Duke was actually researching this whole area when he sadly died of cancer ten years ago; he was teaching at a Baptist college in Missouri.

Charles Weber was a pastor organizer, professor of practical theology at Union and author of the book, “A History of the Development of Social Education in the United Neighborhood Houses of New York.” His course, “Church and Community,” which Bonhoeffer took in the fall semester, resembled what some of us call these days call a “service learning initiative,” though it was more than that. Weber used the course to introduce seminarians to the lived theologies of a city in the throes of economic distress, one year into the Depression, and to the impressive displays of social ministries flourishing throughout New York. He arranged site visits for the class, and Bonhoeffer could hardly believe his eyes, accompanied the students—never happened in Berlin—as they journeyed from the Union quadrangle to take part in organizing initiatives based in churches and synagogues. Bonhoeffer wrote at the end of the year, “In connection with his course, I paid a visit almost every week to one of these character-building agencies: settlements, YMCAs, home missions, cooperative houses, playgrounds, children’s courts, night schools, socialist schools, asylums, youth organizations, National Advancement for Colored People. It is immensely impressive to see how much personal self-sacrifice is achieved with how much devotion, energy, and sense of responsibility the work is done.” The students all visited the National Woman’s Trade Union League and the Worker’s Educational Bureau of America. They discussed, as Bonhoeffer said, labor problems, restrictions to profits, civil rights, juvenile crime, and the activity of the churches in these fields; they studied the role of the churches in selective buying campaigns and public policies, drawing on models gleaned from the Southern Tenants Farmworkers Union, the Delta Cooperative. They met with officials from the American Civil Liberties Union, the nation’s premier defender of civil liberties, which after its founding in 1920 had focused heavily on the rights of conscientious objectors and the protection of resident aliens from deportation. When Bonhoeffer returned to Berlin in the summer of 1931, he told one of his brothers, “We will need an ACLU of our own.”

From his field work with Charles Weber, this largely forgotten professor of practical theology, Bonhoeffer saw illuminated a pathway from the theological classroom to the concrete social situation, and many of the phrases of American social theology began to pepper his lectures and writings and books. In his personal recollection of Bonhoeffer’s year in the United States, Hans Kristoffen, Bonhoeffer’s cousin, said, “Dietrich learned so much in America, probably more than he realized. He learned something that was missing in German theology: the grounding of theology in reality.”

This circle of Christian social reformers, which Bonhoeffer joined at Union, also included the engaged scholars John King Gord and William Klein and Gaylord White, and as I mentioned above, James Dunbrowsky and Miles Horton. And among this company of white Southern dissidents, let us also remember Howard Buckester and Sherwin Eddy, Lillian Smith, Jessie Daniel Aims, Lucy Randal Maiken, all of whom became familiar to Bonhoeffer in those years.

Let me just say a quick word about Miles Horton. A country boy, born from the riverboat town of Savannah, Tennessee, and someone who surely represents a theological student, a type of seminarian inconceivable to Bonhoeffer before his year in America. Horton grew up in rural poverty of the sort documented by James Agee and Walker Evans in their landmark volume, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. He was educated at Cumberland College, a school set up for poor whites in Appalachia, and spent many of his summers working in vacation Bible schools in the mountains of East Tennessee. He later said in an interview that the only reason he was ever admitted to Union was because the “seminary was looking for a token hillbilly.” While the aristocratic Berliner regarded Union as sophomoric, Horton felt intimidated by the extremely high, he said, intellectual level at Union, and remained always mindful of his educational and cultural background. In 1932, this—if not token, certainly holey—hillbilly returned to East Tennessee to set up an experimental school for educating for fundamental social change. This experiment—the Highlander Folk School—emerged as one of the most influential training centers in the Eastern seaboard, equipping southern workers with skills for labor organizing, and helping launch the congress of industrial organizations. In the 1950s, under Miles Horton’s direction, Highlander turned its attention from labor to the burgeoning civil rights movement, and helped train a generation of church-based organizers that included such brilliant theological activists as Ella Baker, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King, Jr. These representatives of the American organizing tradition pressed Bonhoeffer to reexamine his understanding of the theological and scholarly vocation, and these men and women must surely be counted among the greater cloud of witnesses which Bonhoeffer pursued.

Still, nowhere in his first American encounters is the “turning from the phraseological to the real,” as he would later describe this experience, rendered more vividly than in his intense involvement in African American Christian spirituality and in the churches of Harlem, to which I now turn briefly. Frank Fisher was the son of a Black Baptist minister in Birmingham and had been assigned to the Abyssinian Baptist Church as a pastoral intern. Frank Fisher’s invitation to this young German to join him one Sunday morning at Abyssinian marked the beginning of an intense six-month immersion in the African American church. In time, Bonhoeffer, in his fine tailored suits and silk ties, began teaching a Sunday school class for boys and a Wednesday evening women’s bible study, and he began to assist in various youth clubs. On at least one occasion he was invited to preach in the pulpit of the venerable Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. Miles Horton vividly recalled an exchange with Bonhoeffer on a Sunday just after he had returned from one of his first visits to Abyssinian. Horton says, “Bonhoeffer was excited and talkative. Instead of going to his room he described the teaching with great enthusiasm, and the audience participation, and especially the singing of the spirituals. He was quite emotional and did not try to hide his feelings, which was quite rare for him. He said it was the only time he had experienced real religion in the United States and was convinced that it was only among the oppressed that there could be any revival in this nation.”

Not to be overlooked, Bonhoeffer’s presence at Abyssinian in 1930 and 1931 coincided with significant transformations in Powell’s understanding as a minister at an urban parish. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. had been the senior minister at the historic church since 1908. He was an eloquent preacher and a skilled administrator, but as the Depression began to sweep over his Harlem parish, he was inspired to new convictions as a pastor and a citizen. In his lovely short memoir, “Upon this Rock,” he said he began to see Jesus differently, to imagine Jesus no longer as a transcendent reality, “powerful but inaccessible,” but to see Jesus as someone who wandered the streets of Harlem,

someone who shared the struggles of the poor as friend and counselor, and Powell invited the young German theologian into the full life of the congregation. Paul Layman, some of you know and have heard of, an affable Midwestern fellow student and later professor of Christian ethics at Union, worried that Bonhoeffer was spending too much time in Harlem. As early as October, Bonhoeffer had signed up for a trip to Negro centers of life and culture, he had procured a large biography of the Negro compiled by the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library, and he read articles on the NAACP, legal aspects of race, he immersed himself in all the energies and discoveries of the Harlem renaissance. It was, Laymen said, “as if he had forged a remarkable kind of identity with the Negro community.” And on Thanksgiving of 1930, Bonhoeffer joined Frank Fisher and his relatives in Washington D.C., where he had great Southern food and spoke with a group of African American intellectuals based at Howard University. In the spring of 1931, Bonhoeffer took a long road trip that went to Chicago and to many other cities on the way back to New York with his fellow classmate, the Frenchman John Laserre, who was very active in the French Resistance—I’d love to talk about him later. It was a road trip that took the men from New York to Chicago, and to St. Louis, where Bonhoeffer said in his journal after a meeting with some faculty at a Lutheran seminary nearby, that he “had just rubbed against the most unbearable kind of exclusive orthodoxy.” And he said a lot of other unkind things as well! On to New Orleans, Fort Worth, and Loretto, Texas. After a long train trip down to Mexico City, he drove through the Deep South, along old Highway 11 from New Orleans, through Haveysburg, Birmingham, Knoxville, the mining towns of Western Virginia, back on the way to New York. 4,000 miles in an old beat-up car in seven weeks, and an additional twelve thousand miles on Mexican trains. And it appears that somewhere in the Deep South he stopped and attended a service at an African American church in some rural area and wrote in his journal that here, in the church of the outcast of America, he had heard the gospel preached. “The conditions are really rather unbelievable: separate railway cars, tramways, buses south of Washington. When I wanted to eat in a small restaurant with a Negro I was refused service.” He drove through Alabama the same month nine young black men were accused of raping two white women on a freight train and were convicted in a mob atmosphere in successive trials in Scottsboro, Alabama—Scottsboro would have been about a twenty-mile detour off Highway 11. In the church of the outcast of America, he said he found a faith that was robust and resilient enough to resist the idles. Back in Berlin, he fell in love with the Bible. Two doctorates in theology, had no interest in the Bible, but *now* he fell in love with the Bible, and began nurturing a rich devotional life often animated by the Negro spirituals and the gospel standards. He organized spiritual retreats sometimes held in his hut in the forest near Brenau, and he encouraged his students to read scripture with an openness to God’s voice and with attention to the oppressed and the reviled. He was drawn into an intense devotional reading of the Sermon on the Mount, while affirming at the same time the importance of the Christian religion’s rootedness in Judaism and the Hebrew Bible. The young philosophical theologian who had found American social theology an offense to doctrinal correctness became the theologian of concreteness. And of course, within two months of the 1933 Aryan laws, Bonhoeffer had drafted public documents condemning the edict, punctuating his opposition with the claim that “he who does not cry out for the Jew may not sing Gregorian chants.”

Well, what became of his friend Frank Fisher? After graduating from Union, Fisher taught at Morehouse College for a spell before accepting the call in 1948 to the West Hunter Baptist Church in Atlanta, where he remained until his death in 1960 at age 51. And in January of 1957, Frank Fisher was arrested with 100 ministers from the Law, Love, and Liberation Movement, the “Triple L” campaign, for sitting in the whites-only section of Atlanta city buses. MLK Jr. who was still in 1957 in Montgomery and Frank Fisher soon became soul travelers in the southern freedom struggle. In the same year, 1957, combined their energies in forming the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference, which gathered around the bold mission “to redeem the soul of America.” Atlanta’s public transportation would not be desegregated for another two years, but its campaign, like this ambitious new agenda of the SCLC, had been based on the remarkable success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. I should say, however, that while the Montgomery Bus Boycott had been a remarkable success, it had not been about “redeeming the soul of America,” at least not in the sense in which SCLC’s preacherly vanguard would soon embark on a social justice revival to the nation.

Let’s talk about that for a minute. My students are very often surprised to learn that Dr. King came to Montgomery that spring of 1954 that civil rights activism was not on his list of priorities. He came to Montgomery because it offered a nice salary, had a highly educated congregation, and a comfortable and soon to be renovated parsonage, and a new organ in the church. Most members of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, the Church of Called King, had no interest in racial crusading either. King had been given an earful about the embarrassments and the vexations which his predecessor at Dexter, Vernon Johns, had heaped upon the congregation. Johns, a brilliant erudite classics scholar from Virginia-educated Oberlin college, nonetheless confronted the silk-stockinged Dexter parishioners, with their distrust of emotion and enthusiasm, and he challenged and often mocked their complacency and their aspirations to middle-class respectability. “If you ever see a good fight, get into it,” was the motto of Vernon Johns from his mother. In fact, King—and now let’s move to December 1955—had to be talked into accepting the leadership of the Montgomery Improvement Association the day after Rosa Parks refused to move from her seat at the front of the bus. And he accepted only after being reassured—or maybe tricked into believing—that the boycott would be over in a day, twenty four hours. King was busy with other things; of course pulpeteering, but also trying to write this ambitious plan to revamp the Sunday school curriculum. King counted himself no fan of nonviolence, either. One of my favorite stories about this comes from Glen Smiley, who was a white Fellowship of Reconciliation Presbyterian minister from Texas who came to Montgomery in early January of 1956 and in his report back was shocked to have discovered an arsenal in the parsonage on South Jackson street. “When I was in graduate school,” King said, “I thought the only way to solve our problems was through armed revolt.” But as the boycott slowly unfolded, King began to glimpse a longer road ahead, and to reckon publicly and privately with the greater demands of the enlarging protest. He would not be able to get back to this plan to revamp the Sunday school program, and his dissertation would rely heavily on unoriginal and often plagiarized material. As the days turned into weeks and the boycott entered its second month in January—late January of the new year, 1956—King, many of you may know, fell into deep despair over his leadership, which he imagined to be a complete failure, and the floundering campaign which had seemed so promising. The protest lay in utter disarray, and the fragile unities seemed to be breaking down. But as King told the story in his memoir of the Montgomery year, “Strive Toward Freedom,” a vision of Jesus, at midnight, in his kitchen in this parsonage, saying “Do not be afraid, never be afraid, never, never, never be afraid,” graced him with new perceptions on the situation at hand. And he also put away the gun. He said he was so much more afraid in Montgomery when he had a gun in his house. The gun, he concluded, was not only an emblem of fear but an incubator of one, and its removal, he decided, cleared for him a wider space for God’s will to be discerned. On Jan. 30, 1956, King was speaking to a standing-room only audience at the First Baptist Church, African-American, when word reached him that his home, the parsonage, had been bombed. He received the news, as Ralph Abernathy later noted, like “a man inwardly prepared for battle,” surprising many in the congregation when they learned what had happened. “My religious experience a few nights earlier gave me the strength to face it,” King wrote. By the time he reached his home a crowd was forming in the street and front yard. Memories of the size of the crowd vary greatly; some say hundreds, some say thousands. But everyone recalled that the nonviolent protest had reached a breaking point. King, making his way through the crowd,



felt the undercurrents of rage that had run strong for years in the community rising into an immediate threat of violence. He overheard one man saying, “I ain’t gonna move anywhere. That’s the trouble now. You white folks is always pushing us around. Now, you got your ’38 and I got mine, so let’s battle it out right now.”

With the front window shattered and a massive hole blasted into the porch, King was relieved to find Coretta and their baby daughter in good spirits and safe. Meanwhile, the crowd, still collecting newcomers from all corners of the neighborhood, continued to press forward against the police barricade. King knew he needed to address the people. He walked onto the porch and called for order. He offered the reassurances that Coretta and Yoki, his daughter, were unharmed. Then he said from the damaged front porch, “Let’s not become panicky. If you have weapons, please take them home. If you do not have them, please do not seek to get them. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. Remember those words: *He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.* Remember, that’s what God said. We must meet hate with love.”

JoAnn Robinson, in her marvelous memoir on the women who started the Montgomery Bus Boycott, recalled that as King spoke, a respectful hush settled over the crowd, and a scattering of gentle “Amen’s,” “God bless you’s,” and “we are with you all the way, Reverend’s,” created a new momentum. Tears rolled down the faces of many gathered there, as some began to hum church songs. Even the police grew still and listened. King’s words, and the people’s response, drew together the parsonage and the street, and wrapped the whole expanse of the Montgomery night into a sheltering peace. King knew all too well that the gathering could have turned into the darkest chapter of Montgomery’s history, with hundreds—some say thousands—of angry people surrounding the white, middle-aged mayor and his three sidekicks, but “something happened,” King said, that diverted the disaster. “The spirit of God was strong in our hearts, and a night that seemed destined to end in unleashed chaos came to an end in a majestic display of nonviolence.”

In the final weeks of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King told a jubilant audience at the Holt Street Baptist Church—which had just received word that the United States Supreme Court was ruling in favor of the Montgomery protestors—King told this jubilant crowd that “while we need to protest, and while we will need to boycott, and while we will need to contest and change the material conditions of injustice, the end is not the protest. The end is not the boycott. The end of our struggle,” he said, “is reconciliation. The end is redemption. The end is the creation of the beloved community.”

When King boarded the bus the next week, sitting by Glen Smiley, the white Texas minister, he told the reporter, he told the whole group of reporters, “Now is the time to move from protest to reconciliation.” Sometimes I wonder if we are not frozen in that moment. But then I’m inclined to think that perhaps that moment is our basic condition; the movement from protest to reconciliation remains always dialectical. A swinging between the two. Neither the one nor the other. An imperfection in which somebody new gets on and somebody else is left. The excruciating demands of justice and love.

King and the campaigns he led did not, in any case, move directly from protest to reconciliation. There was a lot of hard work to do. Within the month he formed a brotherhood called the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the next year he gave up his only full-time pastorate, the one in Montgomery, to redeem the soul of America. But what would that mean? What does that mean, “to redeem the soul of America?” Did it mean to “create beloved community,” and what is that? Did it mean to achieve the American dream, to win equal rights for the races under the law, to integrate public schools, to realize the coming new order, to consummate history’s pulse towards the interrelatedness of all things? For a while, King pursued them all. And at least until 1965, a confluence—this is a wonderful term from John Howard Yoder, the Mennonite theologian—a confluence of optimisms enabled King to imagine a convergence of these hopes in

the Civil Rights Movement. In these halcyon days of American democratic piety, Christian faith served the cause not as an opiate but as a stimulant, and the mission of redeeming America's soul would rest comfortably in the arms of federal judges and sympathetic legislators. The roaring lion of Zion, flanked by the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, would march triumphantly towards freedom. And from 1957 until 1965, social progress in America time and again confirmed this great optimism, and always the direction in which the achievement pointed seemed to confirm the hopes: voter registration, freedom schools, political organizing, crusades, sit-ins, marches, protests, SNCC's discipline work in Southwest Georgia and Mississippi, the martyrs of Birmingham and Dechoba County, the Pentecostal fires of the Black freedom struggle scorching clear the ground, and then the Voting Rights Act of 1964, the Civil Rights Act of 1965, that forever changed race relations in the United States and made us a better nation. The ageing legal structures of segregation steadily collapsed under the new framework of federal protections, yet despite all this, the story of the Civil Rights Movement that runs from Montgomery to Atlanta, from Albany to Jackson, from Rock Hill to St. Augustine, from Birmingham to Memphis, concluded in shattered dreams and crushed expectations, for at some point in that crusade to redeem the soul of America, the coalescence of hope and progress dissolved into the brutal ambiguities of history. And what happens then? What happens when the "daybreak of freedom gives way to the cry of disappointment," as King poignantly wrote in his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here?* According to Duke theologian Richard Lischer, after 1956, King removed the term "beloved community" altogether from his speeches and sermons, preferring now only "the Kingdom of God," "biblical reign," the "eschatological inbreaking of God in history and crisis and judgment." What happens then for hopes of national redemption when those hopes run up against, Niebuhr, the uncontactable contradictions in which human nature is involved? In his righteous, weary 1967 sermon at Riverside Church in New York City, delivered one year to the date of his murder in Memphis, King revealed the fault lines and the chastened vision of history. Renewing his commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ, and placing himself indeed in the fierce urgency of now, his words rang out with the searing heat of holy despair. He told the congregation that "just a few years earlier, during America's shining moment of compassion, there had been a real promise for people of every race. There were experiments, new beginnings, expectations—then the movement dispersed, and now the storm clouds of Vietnam are casting threatening shadows over the American soulcape, and these many beautiful and courageous experiments are abandoned as if they were idle political playthings of a society gone mad on war." SCLC had sought to redeem the soul of America, and yet now King howled a brokenhearted lament that America's soul was poisoned. "Hope remains," he said, "but only in our resolve to recapture the revolutionary spirit, and to go into the farthestmost ends of the world declaring hostility to poverty, racism, and militarism."

In the final year of his life, King turned his attention directly to the economic sources of inequality when he launched the still-unfinished Poor People's Campaign, hoping to cast as public theater the tragic realities of poverty in America. And among that extraordinary campaign's demands were full unemployment, a guaranteed annual income, healthcare for all people, and construction funds for low-cost housing. King had planned to lead a procession of mule-carts with a caravan of shotgun shacks loaded onto flatbed trucks from the blighted terrain of the Delta, with thousands of people in tow, for a pilgrimage to Washington, where the participants would construct a shantytown near federal buildings, and the proposed date for the beginning of the poor people's journey was April 22, 1968.

Okay, finally. A symbolic solution? Surely, this isn't the beloved community, this is perhaps a beloved community. King dropped the inclusive we, and affirmed instead a radical remnant. The "we" who will get to that promised land on that stormy night on April 3 in Memphis was not America. King surely never abandoned the hope of the lion laying down with the lamb, but his hope

endured this final eschatological intensification that unsettled his worldly confidences, took him to wit's end, personally and psychologically, and then threw him back on his earliest convictions; redemption would come as an interruption, not as a continuation. And it was rather in the community of outcast, in the church of the outcast of America, that the inbreaking new Kingdom could be glimpsed, tasted, and felt. And if one wanted to redeem the soul of America, if one wanted to redeem the soul of the nation, one must turn to spaces of redemption action and fellowship, to beloved communities, to excluded neighborhoods, to bold experiments in love, to God movements, to quiet revolutions, to "free-floating monasteries," as SNCC onetime called itself, to enfleshed congregations, to nonviolent armies, or to new monastic enclaves on the windswept coast of Northern Germany, or to a smoke-filled Berlin salon where dissident Lutheran pastors gather around a grand piano singing "Go Down, Moses." This outrageous notion that social redemption begins in communities on the margins seems so completely alien to me, us, to the principalities and the powers that, as Bonhoeffer himself wrote in 1933, "only one other image might be even more outrageous: namely, that Jesus this man of the ruthless either/or, goes not only to children but to sinners, traffics with despised tax collectors, the deceivers, the prostitutes, makes his home in the church of the outcast."

Thank you very much.