

The Burden of Former Things

Isaiah 43:18-25

Mark 2:1-12

Many of you are very familiar with this iconic photograph from the Civil Rights Movement. It was taken by a reporter for the Arkansas Democrat named Will Counts on September 4, 1957 in Little Rock, Arkansas. Nine African-American students – the Little Rock Nine – attempted on that day to attend Central High School for the first time. Central was the first high school in a major southern city that was set to be integrated, three years (justice rarely moves swiftly) after the landmark Supreme Court ruling, *Brown vs. Board of Education* that abolished the falsity of separate but equal. Tensions were high in the city as whites mobilized to keep the black students out of Central High. The governor had called out the National Guard to surround the school to “maintain peace and order” by prohibiting the black students from entering.

This is Elizabeth Eckford, one of the nine. She was a serious, intelligent young woman from a serious and strict family. Her father worked for the Missouri Pacific Railroad stocking trains and renting pillows and whose mother taught laundering at the Arkansas School for the Blind and Deaf Negro.¹ Her parents were not particularly political, but her mother was pious and brought her children together on the morning of September 4 to recite Psalm 27:

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to eat up my flesh, they stumbled and fell. Though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; Though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident.

As Elizabeth walked towards the bus stop and headed to school, she was unaware that somehow she had not received word as to where the students were to meet to enter the school together. Instead, she found herself attempting to enter the school alone. Rebuffed by the National Guard, she found herself isolated and soon a crowd of angry, hostile white students and citizens had gathered behind her, jeering and shouting at her. With his camera, Will Counts captured what must have been a terrifying moment for Elizabeth.

The person yelling behind Elizabeth is Hazel Bryan. She looks older, but she was actually only 15 ½ in this picture and was a student at Central. Her father was a disabled war vet, and her mother worked in the Westinghouse factory, so they didn't have a lot of money. Her family were members of the fundamentalist East Side Church of Christ, where Hazel remembers the preacher bluntly saying, “The birds don't mix; why should the races?” Hazel was not a particularly good student, being more interested in dating and dancing than studying. On that September morning, she hadn't gone to school with the intent of protesting, but found herself drawn into the fun and simply started yelling awful things that she had been taught.

This photo has always haunted me. The dignity, poise and stoicism of Elizabeth Eckford stand in such painful contrast to the vitriolic hatred and ugliness of Hazel. The faces among the crowd are equally disturbing. While some reflect the grim intensity of hostility, others seem somewhat

amused and entertained, almost as if this were a sporting event, a blood sport, no doubt. I cannot imagine the terror that Elizabeth must have felt in this moment.

Even decades later the photograph pushes us inward: where would I have been on that morning? Which of these faces might have been mine? Which is still mine? Have things really changed? How much? For whom?

Of course, I'd like to think that somehow I would have been standing up for justice if I had been there. After all, there were two white people who intervened, helping Elizabeth get safely onto a bus and out of the area. There was one white minister (a Presbyterian) standing with the other eight. But if I'm honest, if we're honest, it's unlikely that any of us would have helped in that moment. After all, most of us have been given numerous opportunities to be courageous, and most of us, most of the time, have passed on the offer.

I've also often wondered; what ever happened to Elizabeth and Hazel after this moment that was so concretely recorded and presented to the world? How did they live out their lives? What was their understanding of this moment? Indeed, I wonder that about everyone who was gathered on that morning, everyone in this picture. Did they look back on this moment with pride, indifference, satisfaction, disgust, remorse? How many even remember that they were there?

Thanks to the recent work of journalist David Margolick, we have some of these answers, clouded though they might be from the passing of time. His recently published book, *Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock* (Yale University Press, 2011), describes the lives and relationship of these two women, paying particular attention to their points of intersection and engagement. As you might imagine, the history is complicated, their relationship complex.

Approximately five or six years after the photo was taken, Hazel Bryan, now Hazel Massery, got to thinking about the legacy that she wanted to leave to her young sons. Her introspection led her to call Elizabeth to apologize for what she had done. Although Elizabeth wasn't sure who Hazel was, she accepted the apology in a conversation that lasted approximately five minutes. Hazel went on to become increasingly political, engaging in peace activism and social work, including work with black teenagers and families. When asked, she expressed shame about what she had done.

Elizabeth, for her part, struggled with depression and what we would now recognize as post traumatic stress. She struggled to purge her past, burning letters and memories of that time. Unable to cope, she dropped out of college and joined the army. Eventually she moved back into her parent's home in Little Rock where she had two sons and finally went on disability for recurrent depression. Town people dubbed her as "crazy or weird" and "wrote her off as damaged, eccentric."

Later in life, Hazel and Elizabeth became friends of a sort, pushed together again by the fame of the photograph and people's desire for a happy ending. They appear to have a fragile and tenuous friendship, shaped as it was by extraordinary forces of violence, hope, disappointment, expectations and trauma. There are times of great tension and distance in the friendship, especially from Elizabeth. It doesn't quite conform to what we might desperately want in terms of a model of reconciliation, forgiveness, and the triumph of good.

And maybe that's just how it is; this legacy, this nature of sin. For that is what this photograph so poignantly and disturbingly captures - the sin of our nation; its ideologies of white supremacy, privilege, hatred, fear, violence, entitlement, power; all converging upon the lonely and isolated figure of a well groomed, dignified and frightened young black student and countless others like her.

The novelist James Baldwin writes, "*The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do.*"² In light of Little Rock, Arkansas, these words are painful to consider and so I'm not sure how to hold this moment, this piece of history. It can be overwhelming, even paralyzing to consider the implications and challenges of that insight as we struggle with what it means to live, especially as white people of faith, within our historical context of a pervasive racism and violence.

Maybe, maybe it is in this kind of honest confusion and paralysis and guilt and need that we can hear the voice of second Isaiah softly calling to a people lost in the wilderness:

You have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. I, I am the One who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins. (Is 43)

A divine gift of grace and hope and possibility. A gift that Jesus offers to the paralyzed man brought before him, "*Son, your sins are forgiven.*" Let me be clear. This is not the stuff of cheap grace that gratuitously eradicates the past and absolves us of all responsibility. Rather, it is the gift that enables us to pick up our mat and move into a future that through the manner of our living becomes more humane and loving for all.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? Might this be possible, even across these decades of hurt, damage, disappointment and discouragement? The words of the black feminist poet June Jordan may offer a way beyond our paralyses:

As I think about anyone or any thing - whether history or literature or my father or political organizations or a poem or a film - as I seek to evaluate the potentiality, the life-supportive commitment/possibilities of anyone or any thing, the decisive question is, always, where is the love? The energies that flow from hatred, from negative and hateful habits and attitudes and dogma, do not promise something good, something I would choose to cherish, to honor with my own life. It is always the love, whether we look to the spirit of Fannie Lou Hamer, or to the spirit of Agostinho Neto, it is always the love that will carry action into positive new places, that will carry your own nights, and days beyond demoralization and away from suicide.³

May love bring honor to our lives; and hope and healing to an angry and hateful world.

Amen.

¹ David Margolick, *Elizabeth and Hazel: Two Women of Little Rock* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011)

² James Baldwin, "White Man's Guilt," in *The Price of the Ticket* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1985)

³ June Jordan, "Where is the Love?" in *Civil Wars* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981)



Photo by Will Counts

Carol Wise
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