



Prez Release

The Quiet Strength of Rosa Parks November 2005

A great American died this past week. If there ever was or could be an American saint it was Rosa Parks. Her life reminds us that there are people who live their lives, never intending to become a symbol or an icon, but history remembers them otherwise. December 1, 1955 was a day just like most others for the quiet seamstress taking a bus home after work in Montgomery, Alabama. By her own testimony, she did not get on the bus to get arrested; she got on the bus to go home. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said in her acknowledgment of Parks' death, "She was just sick and tired of being sick and tired." Parks own recollection of the bus boycott, that gained momentum following her simple, but brave act, always included her discomfort with being credited for starting the bus boycott. Parks said, "I was just one of many who fought for freedom and many others began to want to fight for their rights as well." Parks own memoirs refer to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s statement that "If you will protest courageously and yet with dignity and Christian love, the historians will have to pause and say: there lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization."

The life of Rosa Parks certainly injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of American society. I have often wondered what caused Mrs. Parks to do what she did on the historic day nearly 50 years ago. This poignant question has haunted me for years, particularly after visiting the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis. Part of the exhibit there is a bus like the one Parks rode on in Montgomery. As you get on the bus an audio message tells you to move to the rear of the bus. The command is given several times with stronger tones each time, laced with the pejorative rhetoric typical of that era. Though this was only a museum recreation of that period of injustice, I had to ask myself what I might have done if that was my everyday experience and was legal. Yet Rosa Parks said, "We are all God's children and deserving of His rewards. I was fortunate. God provided me the strength I needed at the precise time when conditions were ripe for change."

The Old Testament is full of practical suggestions as to how justice can impact an entire community. In Exodus 23:4-5 the text says, "If you meet your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you should bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who

hates you lying under a burden, you should refrain from leaving him with it, you should help him lift it up.”

That momentous day in December of 1955 saw Rosa Parks refusing to surrender her seat to a white man on a bus as required by the law. She explains it this way—“Not standing up on the bus that night was a matter of self-respect. Everyday of my life I have wanted to be treated with self-respect and I have wanted to treat others with respect. I had expected and hoped that others would feel the same. But because of my race I was denied that respect.” On December 1, 1955 Rosa Parks saw a man on a bus who owned a donkey called prejudice. She refused to let this man lay under the burden of that donkey and with her love of mercy reached down and lifted up the donkey off the man and in so doing created an initial step in a community building bridge, yet to be completed, but certainly built on godly principle.

Rosa Parks’ life gives testimony to the power of God’s gift of dignity. She lived in a world that denied her the fruit of that gift, but so strong was the gift of dignity in her life that it could not be hid. It broke out of hiding on that day and shone for the entire world to see. The Creator has endowed human beings with a sense of worth that cannot be attained through human effort or any mode of acquisition. Somehow Rosa Parks lived in the light of that gift and it liberated her to breach the walls of segregation and as she walked through that breach to freedom, she fully realized it was God who had called her to follow. A Mother of our nation has passed on to her reward. Her life is worth remembering and, most importantly, worth emulating.

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