

The Road Less Traveled – March 30, 2018

Linda Brown died earlier this week. You may have missed the story. I almost did. Linda Brown was the little girl at the center of the 1954 landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* case that struck down the practice of racial segregation in public schools. Linda was only 8 years old when her father, Oliver Brown, a pastor at St. John African Methodist Episcopal Church in Topeka, Kan., tried to enroll her in an all-white school in the family's neighborhood. Linda was denied entry, and Oliver Brown joined with the NAACP and a dozen other plaintiffs, filing suit against the school district demanding that it end its practice of racial discrimination.

It would be three years before the Supreme Court finally decided the case, unanimously ruling that "separate but equal" was inherently unequal and thus unlawful. It would be three more years before the decision was actually enforced, when federal marshals escorted nine African-American students into an all-white high school in Little Rock, Ark.

Linda Brown never got to attend the school in which her father fought so hard to enroll her. The family moved from their Topeka neighborhood before the case was decided. But I can't help but wonder what it was like for a third-grader to be at the center of such a fight. Linda was later quoted as saying that she knew "something was terribly wrong about this" when her parents told her she couldn't attend the school in her neighborhood because her face was black, but I can't imagine the pressure a little girl must have felt. My guess is she just wanted to be normal kid with friends and sleepovers where they giggled about boys. I would imagine she felt powerless at times, wishing it would just all go away.

None of us like to feel acted upon. We like to remain in control, to control our own actions and destinies. But I was reminded this week that there is a holy power that exists when we choose to surrender ours. On Tuesday my Lenten devotional featured an excerpt from a book written by Henri Nouwen called *A Spirituality of Waiting*. Nouwen was a Catholic priest and theologian and one of my favorite authors, who died in 1996. In this excerpt Nouwen drew a contrast between action and passion.

"The central word in the story of Jesus' arrest is one I never thought much about. It is 'to be handed over.' That is what happened in Gethsemane. Jesus was handed over. Some translations say that Jesus was 'betrayed,' but the Greek says he was 'handed over.' Judas hands Jesus over. But the remarkable thing is that the same word is used not only for Judas but also for God. God did not spare Jesus, but handed him over to benefit us all.

"So this word, 'to be handed over,' plays a central role in the life of Jesus. Indeed this drama of being handed over divides the life of Jesus radically in two. The first part of Jesus' life is filled with activity. Jesus takes all sorts of initiatives. He speaks; he preaches; he heals; he travels. But immediately after Jesus is handed over, he becomes the one to whom things are being done. He's being arrested; he's being led to the high priest; he's being taken before Pilate; he's being crowned with thorns; he's being nailed on a cross. Things are being

done to him over which he has no control. That's the meaning of passion – being the recipient of other people's initiatives.

“It is important for us to realize that when Jesus says, ‘It is accomplished,’ he does not simply mean ‘I have done all the things I wanted to do.’ He also means, ‘I have allowed things to be done to me that needed to be done to me in order for me to fulfill my vocation.’ Jesus does not fulfill his vocation in action only, but also in passion.”

That struck me as particularly profound. Because I can remember times in my life when I reluctantly surrendered to the care or hospitality of others, only to discover a special blessing that I had not anticipated. And I can remember times when I felt like a victim, at the mercy of the actions of others, only to realize later that God had been at work in the midst of my victimhood.

We are a people of action. It's how we were raised. It's who we are. But this Easter vigil is a stark reminder that God works not only through our actions, but also through our surrender, our passion. Jesus did not put himself on the cross; he allowed others to do it. But without that surrender, the glorious celebration of Easter for which we are preparing would not be a celebration at all. Sunday would be just another Sunday.