

SLAVERY, DR. MAY & JERRY

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May Memorial Church, Syracuse, New York

This weekend in Mississippi there is a roaring crisis in race relations. A Negro American, the first in that state's history, is seeking admission to the University. The Governor of Mississippi is personally blocking his registration. The federal judiciary has twice ordered the governor to desist. He has refused to receive the court's orders and now is under a third order to purge himself of contempt.

Tension is mounting and time is running out. Segregationists in the South have offered to come into Mississippi to support the governor's civil disobedience. The applicant for admission has been provided protection of U. S. Marshalls. Federal troops are now alerted to enforce the federal orders. Anything can happen.

111 years ago tomorrow something did happen in race relations, something violent, but not in Mississippi. It happened just down the street here in Syracuse. The shoes of disobedience then were on the other feet. The federal government was arrayed against the Negro. The marshalls had arrested and shackled an alleged runaway in accordance with federal law. The word then was slavery, not segregation, -- and the lawless were the city's clergymen, lawyers, businessmen, a congressman and many others. One of the clergymen was the minister for whom this church is named. Supporting him were most of his congregation.

It is this earlier crisis in race relations of October 1, 1851, with its civil disobedience, its leadership by a peace-loving Unitarian divine and its significance as part of the American dilemma that I wish to observe this morning. May it serve to enlighten this place and this day.

I

The crisis was called the Jerry Rescue and nothing so violent since has happened here. Samuel Joseph May was the minister. Jerry McHenry, a mulatto, was the alleged fugitive slave. Syracuse was a small city at that time with a mere 25,000 people. When Mr. May accepted the call to the Unitarian pulpit six years earlier, the city numbered only 8,000 citizens. The congregation had been started seven years before, in 1838. But in thirteen years time, -- what with the Canal running through the city and the industrial revolution popping -- Syracuse boomed. Oh, how I wish that as a Yankee I had been transplanted to this place a century and more earlier! I think I would have been at home here.

Syracuse in the 1830's was deliberately not interested in slavery or its abolition, like most of the rest of the northern states. Ever since 1808, when the importing of slaves from Africa was halted, people felt that slavery was gradually on the way out. The Missouri Compromise of 1818, though exciting people North and South for a bit, had the effect of further taking the dread question from public view. A few, however, in the North were disturbed. In their abhorrence of human slavery they saw through the popular plans of the slaveholders and their northern friends to colonize the freed slaves in Africa.

But not in Syracuse in the 1830's. Here anti-slavery feeling was repressed, as S. J. May pointed out, by the political and clerical leaders of the town, -- "the shepherds were driven by the sheep". The clergy in the North, before the slave trade was abolished, had spoken out forcefully. But now, in the twenties and thirties, they felt they couldn't rock the boat of economic prosperity based on property. Even that great abolitionist, Gerrit Smith of nearby Peterboro, New York, favored the so-called "humanitarian" plan of colonizing the slaves in Africa.

But underneath things were boiling. In October 1830 in Boston, a disillusioned supporter of the Colonization Society sounded forth the first notes of Abolitionism! He called for immediate, unconditional

emancipation of the slaves, bitterly denouncing the sin of slaveholding and the duplicity of the Colonization promoters. This man, W. L. Garrison, gave lectures subsequently in other cities, including Syracuse. His sheet - "The Liberator" - was read here.

Five years later, a group of Syracuse anti-slave citizens attempted to organize, following the lead in Massachusetts and in other parts of New York. Pro-slavery Syracusans infiltrated the meeting, which had to disband and regather at Fayetteville, where the Anti-Slavery Society was founded. With that, Syracuse was destined for a prominent role in the national anti-slavery conflict.

In the process there was a split in the very respectable First Presbyterian Church, with the splinter group becoming the Congregational Church, for many years the center of anti-slavery forces in this city. The Methodist Church likewise split in two, and the come-outer group called the first anti-slave Methodist minister in the city. It was at about this time too the Unitarians gathered into a church.

By 1840 not only was the Underground Railroad in operation here, but anti-slavery feeling had gradually come to the point where the public felt the abolitionist had every right to have as many meetings as they wished. Indeed, a slave girl, named Harriet Powell, was wafted away from her visiting master and mistress the year before, just down the street from here. The next dozen years were to see violent things brewing in Syracuse; many of them concocted by the gentle zealot, Samuel Joseph May.

II

He was born in Boston ten years after the U. S. Constitution was adopted. He was reared in that Unitarian citadel, King's Chapel, and gave his first sermon on the Sunday after Daniel Webster's great speech on slavery in 1820. But S. J. May had hardly been out of Boston and knew little whereof Webster had spoken. The following July, however, he traveled with his sister to Washington D. C. On the way, in Maryland, -- could it have been Route 40? -- he saw by the roadside thirty colored men, handcuffed and fastened along a heavy chain, attached to a wagon. His sister exclaimed: "What crime have these men committed?" Answered a fellow-passenger in the stagecoach: "They are only a gang of slaves that some planter has purchased and he is taking them South." Brother and sister expressed shame and horror. The fellow-passenger observed: "You must be from the North -- from New England." Replied May: "Yes sir, we are from Massachusetts, and I never so fully realized before how great a privilege it is to live where human beings cannot be treated in this manner."

He wrote afterwards: "The matter dropped into the bottom of my heart and made me an Abolitionist!" That heart had been ready, for May's religion was already practical, rather than doctrinal or ceremonial. The way and the only way to show God's love in the world, he believed, was to live a loving life toward all men -- "to respect a human being for his humanity". What animated this man's faith and ethic were the words of Terrence: "Because we are men, we cannot be indifferent to anything that concerns man". And what concerned man, as S. J. May saw it, was suffering, neglect and deprivation of human rights.

Attending the Great Liberator's impassioned lectures in Boston denouncing slavery and demanding immediate and unconditional emancipation without expatriation was the minister of the Brooklyn, Connecticut, Unitarian Church up in the city to see about having a tract on prejudice published by the Unitarian Association. May's response to Garrison: -- "I am sure you are called to a great work, and I mean to help you".

And help he did, till in 1865 he saw the slaves freed at fantastic cost in the blood of the nation. In Connecticut and in Massachusetts May preached, lectured and worked for abolition. He invited Garrison to fill

his pulpit, sought lecture platforms for him and other abolitionists, and became a conductor on the Underground Railroad. He was one of the sixty who formed the American Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia, spent eighteen months as executive director of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, converted most of his parishoners in four churches, and suffered insults on the lecture platform throughout northeast. "Because we are men, we cannot be indifferent to anything that concerns man!"

And it was not only slavery that stirred him -- it was also poor public education, sectarianism, alcoholism, the plight of the laborers on the Erie Canal, Women's Suffrage, the sad conditions on the Onondaga Indian Reservation, and the barbarism of war. But slavery stirred him most, and he brought it, politics and all, into the pulpit.

To his critics in Brooklyn, South Scituate, Lexington, and Syracuse, he said: "If inculcating the two great commandments and the Golden Rule be preaching politics, -- if reiterating the glorious Declaration of our National fathers that 'all men are created equal' and denouncing every violation of the inalienable rights of the least of our brothers be preaching politics, then woe is me, and woe to every other man who stands in the pulpit and does not preach politics."

This May Memorial Pulpit is indeed an honorable and awesome one!! It's namesake in the flesh was what came to Syracuse in 1845 to stay for 24 exciting years. He had already announced his abolitionism before accepting the call, preaching on it deliberately when he came to candidate. In six months time his voice was lecturing the city, his pen writing anti-slavery resolutions for the Syracuse abolitionists, and his congregation providing him with clothing for the passengers on the Underground Railroad.

In five years time the infamous Compromise of 1850 had been engineered in Congress, ostensibly to save the Union. The new legislation allowed California to come into the Union as a free state, abolished the slave market in the District of Columbia, gave popular sovereignty to New Mexico and Utah, and above all, for the South, handed the slave-owners the Fugitive Slave Law whereby any slave owner could whisk back South any Negro up North without trial and with a bonus for their cooperation to the federal marshalls and commissioners. The fat was in the fire!!

III

In the summer of 1851 Daniel Webster was invited to Syracuse by the pro-slavery party to threaten hell on the abolitionists, that the precarious union might be held together and war averted. But the Syracuse Abolitionists, committed to the cause of mankind had already had a mass meeting in City Hall. Most of the populace attending was horrified at the new law. An Anti-Fugitive Slave Law Association was formed, with a Vigilance Committee organized and eager for civil disobedience in the name of the higher moral law. Samuel J. May was in the middle of it.

Its plan: if any Negro was claimed by the authorities, to ring the church bells, rendezvous the Vigilance Committee, and spirit the re-enslaved off to freedom in Canada. Daniel Webster had called the abolitionists Traitors! and predicted the enforcement of the law at the next anti-slavery convention.

On October 1, 1851 as Dr. May was getting up from the lunch table, the bells sounded. There was a state fair in progress up on the hill, and a convention of the Liberty Party in session at the Congregationist Church. Jerry McHenry had been seized, handcuffed, bound and taken to the Federal Commissioner's office on Clinton Square. Dr. May was hurried to the rendezvous, but on the way heard about Jerry being held at the Commissioners Office, so went to see what was happening.

A "trial" was in process, in which the agent of the slaveowner was alone to be heard in proof of ownership of Jerry, who actually had been living here for a number of years. The doomed man was not allowed to state his own case, nor refute the agent's testimony. Such was the law! How could it be obeyed! While the "trial" was going on, the prisoner was not closely guarded. Jerry made a break out of the room and in a moment was in the street below. No plans for escape having been made, and Jerry being still manacled, he was shortly re-captured, badly beaten and put in a back room of the police office. The crowd in the square and on the canal bridges was indignant. After speaking to Jerry by request of the Police Chief, and telling Jerry of the planned rescue, Dr. May hurried off to the rendezvous to help plan the escape.

The rescue actually, was un-necessary, for it was almost certain the Syracusan authorities, federal or not, would not have allowed the slaveowner his and the federal government's way. But the rescue was planned anyway in order to demolish morally the odiousness of the law. The plan was a violent one and Dr. May's pacifist plea was: "If anyone is to be injured in this fray, I hope it may be one of our own party."

In the evening the plan was executed successfully and violently. The state militia was not called out. Five days later Jerry McHenry, after recovering in hiding, and after a hot chase by the patriots, was removed from Syracuse and concealed at Oswego for transportation across the Lake.

The aftermath saw arrests and indictments of thirteen of the "traitorous" rescuers, but not of the real leaders: Gerritt Smith, Charles Wheaton and Samuel J. May. These three even advertised in the newspaper that they were responsible and stood ready for trial. None of the thirteen were convicted. The civil disobedience was a moral victory. There was ~~not another attempt made to execute the Fugitive Slave Law in central New York and the rescue of Jerry had its effect throughout the nation.~~

Ten years later the land was locked in a bloody purge! After the War, in his book on "Recollections of the Anti-Slavery Conflict," S. J. May, the despiser of violence and war, "the zealot with none of the zealous bitterness," wrote that he "felt fully justified, because this great work of anti-slavery was undertaken to complete, by moral and religious means that which the American Revolutionists began; to do what they left undone; to exterminate from our land the worst form of oppression."

This required, we know and he knew, the supreme ironies of civil disobedience, violence and civil war. May even saw himself burned in effigy in the Syracuse streets, the passions were so violent! But civil disobedience in the name of human right and human mercy is inevitable in the face of the compromises of democracy.

CONCLUSION

Let us hope that violence in Mississippi because of the civil disobedience there this week in the vain name of slavery's subtle and worse successor, Segregation, will not occur. It could not be worth it!!

Samuel J. May loved every man. "Because we are men, we cannot be indifferent to anything that concerns man." At the end of his Recollections he prayed: "May the sad experience of the past prompt and impel our nation, before it is too late, to do all for the colored people of our country, South and North, that righteousness demands at our hands!" And that is the meaning irresistibly of May Memorial: --- "all that righteousness demands at our hands," not in Mississippi, but in Syracuse.