

“Pharaoh’s Daughter”
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In 1988, when I was a college senior in Auburn, Alabama, about two hours to the southeast, in Monroeville, AL, a man named Walter McMillian was being convicted of a murder he did not commit. He was sentenced to death. His story is told in the movie “Just Mercy.” His attorney was Bryan Stevenson, a name that has become well known in recent years. I first learned of McMillian’s story when I read Stevenson’s book back in 2015. While the movie is a must see, the book is even more powerful. It weaves McMillian’s story and many other of Stevenson’s death row clients with Stevenson’s analysis of our nation’s policies of mass incarceration to issue a call to fix a broken criminal justice system. Stevenson’s analysis of history is compelling, and his call to action is inspiring.

His call to action is not simply regarding mass incarceration. It’s about engaging any issue we encounter that calls for justice. While I’ve mentioned these before, I don’t think we can talk about them enough. Stevenson proposes four things to do when facing an unjust situation.

First, Stevenson challenges us to get proximate—to get close to the people impacted by the problems we care about in the world. If you care about affordable housing, enter into relationship with people who desperately need it. If you care about public education, get involved in a school that needs your help. If you feel called to do something about mass incarceration, get to know a prisoner. Get to know his family. We can read all the books we want to, watch all the documentaries, post links to articles on social media, but until we get proximate to the people impacted by injustice, we will not fully understand the issue, nor its complexities. We must see people up close, see the complexities of these challenges, see the impact they have on our sisters and brothers in the human family. Get proximate.

Secondly, Stevenson calls us to change the narrative. Every issue has a narrative attached to it. For that matter, so does every person. The narratives surrounding the issues we face are often written by people in power to advance their own agendas. We need to listen critically to the narratives about people on the margins of our society and ask ourselves, “Are they true?” If not, we need to change them. Often these narratives are shaped by fear and designed to create more fear to manipulate people’s support. Our world desperately needs less fear and more faith, less anger and more mercy, less violence and more justice, less death and more life. Faith, mercy, justice and life change the narratives of our world.

Thirdly, Stevenson challenges us to do things that make us uncomfortable, to put ourselves in uncomfortable spaces. If we only stay in the bounds of our own comfort zones, then we will never change, and if we never change, the injustices of our world will remain the same? By doing things that make us uncomfortable, we open the possibility for growth.

Finally, Stevenson challenges us to be hopeful. Scripture teaches us, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” We cannot give into the despair that too often defines unjust systems. We cannot let the realities of today and its suffering, rob us of hope for a different tomorrow. If we do, we will be left in anger and despair. As Scripture teaches us, “Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us because God’s love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.” We must be hopeful.

Get proximate. Change the narrative. Do things that frighten you. Be hopeful. These are Stevenson's four challenges to work for change in our world. In our reading from Exodus 2, these actions are embodied by Pharaoh's daughter. Hers was an unjust world filled with fear, death, and violence. Her father ruled that world and instituted a brutal policy driven by fear. His fear of the Israelites led to policies of oppression, persecution, and ultimately ethnic cleansing and infanticide. I'm not sure what that was like for her. Her life was not directly impacted by her father's policies. She lived in comfort and privilege, far removed from the land of Goshen where her father's policies made life a nightmare from the Israelites. We don't know what she thought about all that, or even if she thought about it. When you live in the palace, you can have no idea what's happening in Goshen.

But when she went down with her attendants to the riverside that day, she spotted that basket in the reeds, she heard that baby's cries, and she got proximate. She moved toward that basket, opened its lid, and looked inside. She saw not a threat to Egyptian sovereignty, but a crying baby, a beautiful crying baby. In that moment, the Israelites were no longer an issue, they were no longer a mob of foreigners threatening to take over the country. Her father's policies were no longer abstract concepts impacting some imagined other far removed from her reality. In that moment, she saw the face of innocence. In that moment, she saw the desperation of a mother who followed the letter of the law, placing her baby boy in the river, but putting him in a basket first. In that moment, she got proximate.

In getting proximate, the narrative changed. Her father had told her these Israelites were a threat. Their numbers were increasing. What if they overthrew Egypt? What if they got too powerful and escaped? Who would build the supply cities? Notice the inherent conflict in Pharaoh's fearful narrative. There's too many of them. What if they escape? Do we have narratives in our world like that, narratives where we fear the presence of the other, yet fear a world without them? They had to be controlled. They had to know their place. Egypt's future was under threat.

In that moment, the narrative changed for Pharaoh's daughter. In that moment, people surpassed policy for her. That baby's cries superseded her father's fears. "This must be one of the Hebrew's babies," she said after hearing his cries, and she had compassion for him. How could she not? In that moment, the horror of Pharaoh's policy of death came into focus in the face of that innocent baby, and the narrative changed for Pharaoh's daughter.

What would she do now? Everything her father ever taught her was called into question. Could she disobey his law? There was no way she could throw that beautiful baby in the river. Then up popped a young girl. "Hey lady," she said, "need a nursemaid for that baby?" She was getting even more proximate, even closer to this baby's humanity. Her new narrative was getting more complex. Who was this girl? How did she happen to know a Hebrew nursemaid? Could she be his sister? Could the nursemaid, who just so happens to be available, be his mother? Could she participate in this conspiracy of grace to save this child? Yes, she could. She could even pay his mother to nurse him. In that moment, Pharaoh's daughter stepped into a whole new world, and her father's fear-filled plans began to unravel.

By saving Moses' life, she joins God's conspiracy of hope, hope for life, hope for justice, hope for freedom, hope for salvation. There's no way she could know that in that moment, but in getting proximate to that baby, in changing the narrative of fear and death governing her world, in stepping into the discomfort of that moment and doing something that surely frightened her, Pharaoh's daughter lives into hope. It all began when God brought that basket from Goshen to the shores of her backdoor.

Where are the Goshens of our world? Where are those places we don't have to go to, places we don't have to know about, places impacted by policies far removed from our daily lives? When I was a college senior in Auburn, Alabama, my Goshen was Monroeville. I didn't have to know anything about Walter

McMillan, or what he was going through. As I was preparing to launch my life, he was going to death row for a crime he didn't commit. Thank God Bryan Stevenson heard his cries and took up his case.

What basket is God bringing to our shores today? Who is crying out to be heard? Where do we need to get proximate? To whom do we need to get closer? What narratives need to change? What do we need to do that might make us uncomfortable? How might doing those things help unravel the twisted ways of this world and live into God's hope for justice and mercy and new life for us all?

There's a lot of fear in our world these days, and a lot of narratives being constructed to stoke our fears. Race and its impact on policing continue to be at the center of our national debate. With the shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin, protests erupted again, devolving into riots. Details about Jacob Blake's history and why police engaged him continue to unfold. What is not in question is that he was shot seven times in the back and is now paralyzed. Two days later, in the midst of the mayhem, a white 17-year old, Kyle Rittenhouse, walked down a public street in that same city— in violation of a curfew — with a military style semi-automatic long gun strapped over his shoulder, and police passed right by him. He had killed two people, and he walked right by. Of course, that happened way up in Goshen, I mean, Kenosha.

What are we to do about all that? Where is our Goshen? Maybe it's in Grier Heights where families impacted by generational poverty that is the bitter fruit of systemic injustice are just trying to get by. Maybe it's a family that can't afford the rent on their apartment that has increased 40% in recent years. I don't know many people in that situation. What if I got more proximate? Maybe it's at Billingsville-Cotswold Elementary School. Maybe a child there who doesn't have access to the technology needed to learn in these virtual days is crying out from her basket? What if we were willing to wade into those complex waters? What would it mean to change the narratives surrounding race in our society? What would it mean to do things that make us uncomfortable?

It could mean embracing hope. It could mean answering God's call to care about what's happening in Goshen, joining God's conspiracy of hope in this world, hope for justice and righteousness and mercy and grace and freedom and new life. It all begins when we get proximate to the problems of our world, change the narratives surrounding them, do things that make us uncomfortable, and embrace hope. It begins when we demonstrate the faith of Pharaoh's daughter.