

There's Still Time

Matthew 25:31-46

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

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One hundred and thirty-eight years ago this weekend, the most famous evangelist and preacher in the world, Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899), arrived in Washington, DC, for a three-day revival meeting, January 16-19, at the Congregational Church. Thousands attended his services, so advanced planning was required. His management team, known as the "Moody Machine," arrived first to coordinate with local committees to ensure the venue was large enough and to disperse tickets for these gatherings. For the Washington meeting, *The National Republican* newspaper reported, January 2, 1885, the organizers decided to issue an invitation "to all ministers within a radius of fifty miles of the city, who are pastors in any evangelical church, to attend this convention... Admission will be by tickets, to be distributed by the city pastors to their membership."¹

Moody arrived in Washington after preaching a revival in Richmond, VA, which was embroiled in controversy. At a revival in 1876 in New York City, Moody said this about Generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, "by every illustration and animus of their lives and actions, they more forcibly represented the character of the king of darkness than any since Judas betrayed the Lord of Glory." Word got back to Richmond. When Moody arrived in Richmond on January 4, 1885, Moses Hoge (1819-1899), minister of Second Presbyterian Church, immediately went to visit him and informed him "that there were no names more venerated and loved in Richmond than those of Generals Lee and Jackson, and that many of our people had been deeply pained by the report that he had spoken of them in a disparaging manner." Moody said that he was misquoted, and according to the *Richmond Dispatch*, said, Lee and Jackson, "were the very men whom he held in the highest honor. He added that he had *never* said what had been imputed to him and then proceeded to express freely and fully his admiration of these eminent men, so dear to the hearts of our southern people." Moody tried to arrange a meeting with Stonewall Jackson's widow. In one of his sermons, Moody said he held both Lee and Jackson as men "of the highest Christian character." Ex-Confederate generals were sitting in the pews. Moody's words made national news as far away as Salt Lake City.

These services in Richmond were held in strict observance of Jim Crow laws with a separate service "for the colored people." When the Moody Machine passed out those tickets to evangelical ministers within a fifty-mile radius of Washington—

Congregationalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians—they were all white. If you were black, you didn't get a ticket. Eight services were held between January 16 and 19 for white evangelical Protestants and only one for black evangelicals.

On the day before Moody arrived in DC, *The National Republican* newspaper printed an anonymous letter titled "Colored Brother Protests:" "Permit me to say to your readers that the colored people of Washington have been shamefully treated by the managers of the Moody meetings to be held at the Congregational Church from the 16th to the 19th.... The programme marked out by these gentlemen calls for eight meetings at the Congregational Church for white persons, and one meeting at a colored church for colored people; and, in keeping with this plan, tickets of admission to the meetings at the Congregational Church have been withheld from the colored ministry. This exhibition of caste prejudice looks very bad in Christian workers, especially Christian ministers, and has already sown seeds of discord among brethren." The letter said that even the "infidel" Robert Ingersoll (1833-1899), the agnostic social reformer (son of a Presbyterian minister), welcomes everyone at his rallies, with no caste prejudice, unlike the organizers of the Moody revivals. Ingersoll was known for socializing with black Americans, welcoming blacks into his house, and sharing meals with black people.

The letter read, "Men do not stop to judge of Christianity by the life and character of its founder and the beautiful spirit of love and brotherhood which it inculcates, but by the lives of its professors. In the presence of such exhibitions as this I am not surprised that men like Mr. Ingersoll, turn away with disgust and pronounce the whole thing an imposture. The surest way to swell the ranks of infidelity and bring religion into contempt is for christian people, for the church of Christ, to continue to multiply such instances of caste prejudice."

No one knows who wrote the letter. It could have been Francis Grimké (1850-1937), pastor of Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in DC (at that time in Logan Circle). It might have been written by Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), as they were close friends. Several months later, Douglass said in a speech in DC: "Infidel though Mr. Ingersoll may be called, he never turned his back upon his colored brothers, as did the evangelical Christians of this city on the occasion of the late visit of Mr. Moody. Of all the forms of negro hate in this world, save me from that one which clothes itself with the name of the loving Jesus, who, when on earth, especially identified himself with the lowest classes of suffering men, and the proof given of his Messiahship was that the poor had the Gospel preached unto them. The negro can go into the circus, the theatre, the cars, and can be admitted into the lectures of Mr. Ingersoll, but cannot go into an Evangelical Christian meeting."

What a sad, shameful, painful story.

When Jesus talked about separating the sheep from the goats in his parable, we must remember that both the sheep and goats are in the church. Judgment was pronounced on both the sheep and the goats.² Some understand what it means to be God's people, who know where Jesus is to be found, and there are those within the church who don't understand what it means to be God's people, and these people, both intentionally and unintentionally, obstruct the realm of God from breaking into the world.

Yes, what a sad, shameful, painful story from 1885. As we all know, this was not an isolated event. It's a story repeated again and again and again and again by the Protestant church in the United States—both evangelical and so-called liberal congregations. No one is spared. It's a painful, shameful, sinful history that has been largely forgotten. In fact, I first read about this story just yesterday!

Southern writer William Faulkner said (1897-1962), "The past is never dead. It's not even past." It's important to confess the sin and tell the painful story, including the story of racism in Baltimore Presbytery—and the Presbytery is engaged in telling this story, for this history shapes us. It impacts how we work today to dismantle structural racism in the church and our communities. The sin of racism in the United States didn't emerge in a vacuum; it was planted, grown, and cultivated over generations, supported, aided, and even "blessed" by a faithless church unwilling to be the church *of* Jesus Christ, a church intentionally choosing *not* to love.

The PCUSA has designated today [Dismantling Structural Racism Sunday](#). This parable is fitting as we honor the life and witness of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) this weekend. Jesus wants us to know that God's people love God's people. God's people love God's people. *Full stop.* Yes, we all know there were times when this was not the case, is not the case today. But there's always hope. "The time is always right," Dr. King said, "to do what is right." There's still time for goats to become sheep. Maybe, first, we need to wake up, and make sure that we are not, in fact, goats. Do we know what it means to be sheep? Do we really want to be sheep? Are we willing to follow Jesus even if it means going against convention and societal norms? The good news is there's still time for goats to become sheep.

¹ I am indebted to Daniel Kleven for his research on this story. All quotations are taken from: "Caste Prejudice:" Black Protest against Dwight L. Moody, Part I: 1885, at <https://biblioskolex.wordpress.com/2023/01/10/caste-prejudice-black-protest-against-dwight-l-moody-1885/>.

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 283-286.