

AMERICAN BAPTIST UNITED MISSION
“God’s Justice and United Mission”

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January 2011

**When we are united in God’s mission,
our United Mission will grow.**

When I was 15 years old, I would often board buses and streetcars in Dallas and intentionally sit in the *back*. Under the Jim Crow laws of the state of Texas and most of the Southern United States at that time, seating on buses and streetcars was segregated by race. A movable sign indicated that “colored” people were to sit in the rear. I was not “colored.”

My boyhood fantasy was that I would be arrested for violating the Jim Crow laws and could then challenge those unjust laws all the way to the United States Supreme Court. I was never arrested; no one ever said anything to me. Only later did I realize that the laws were not intended to keep me as a white person from sitting in the rear behind the movable signs; they were targeted at “colored” persons sitting in the front.

Growing up in Texas in the 1930s and early 1940s, I experienced firsthand and observed the effects of Jim Crow laws and the racism that lingered decades after the Civil War had ended slavery. Though slavery was no longer allowed, Jim Crow laws were in full force and effect. For example, department stores had two kinds of drinking fountains (one for “colored” and one for “white”) and there were four kinds of rest rooms (male and female for each of the two racial designations). Schools were segregated with the false claim that they were “separate but equal.”

In the years afterward, I often wondered why I felt so strongly that justice was being violated by the Jim Crow laws. No pastor or Sunday school teacher had ever said a word in my hearing about the injustice of racial segregation, nor had any family member or friend. I concluded that somehow the biblical texts and stories I heard and learned in church had gotten through to me, despite the fact that their human messengers had not communicated the message of God’s passion for racial justice.

In later years, I recalled Aunt Allie, an African American woman whom I met when I was about six or seven years of age, probably in 1936. My mother’s mother had died in 1913, when my mother was only 10 years old. Her father, a poor farmer in rural Lone Oak, Texas, was left with four young children to care for. Aunt Allie was the woman whom he had engaged as a housekeeper. Twenty-three years later, she told me her story. As best as she could figure, she had been born about 1850, as a slave, and was about 15 years old when the Civil War ended and she was set free. She remembered her years as a slave and told me many of her experiences. I now believe that her story influenced me, primarily on a subconscious level in 1945, when I began to sit “behind the signs” on buses and streetcars in Dallas. Her story reinforced and interacted with the story of justice that I heard in the gospel stories.

Some persons, reading this, may think, “Well, this is all ancient history.” Perhaps! But remember Jesus’ actions and words at the beginning of his ministry in Nazareth, as described in Luke 4. God’s justice shone through Jesus.

14Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 16When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 18“‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, 19to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’” 20And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

I would argue that Jesus is *always* in season and that issues of justice are alive in the U.S, Puerto Rico, and all the rest of Planet Earth.

Last November the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that one in seven households could not buy adequate food in the previous year. The U.S. hunger rate is still at an historic high. Hunger is substantially higher in black and Hispanic families. The twin devils of racism and hunger are stalking us.

“O Holy Night,” which we know best in John Sullivan Dwight’s 1885 translation of Placide Cappeau’s 1847 French poem, contains the words: “Chains shall he break for the slave is our brother; and in *his* name all oppression shall cease” (emphasis added). For American Baptists, I believe, the best channel to do this is through United Mission.

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THANK YOU for your support of American Baptist United Mission!

Ron