



Surrounded!
**“LET US MARCH ON:
NELSON MANDELA”**

Rev. Gary Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Galatians 3:23-29

“Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

A crucial moment in the life of Nelson Mandela was spotlighted in the fascinating movie *Invictus*. Four years after being released from 27 years in prison, one year after being elected the first black president of South Africa, Mandela is looking for something that will unite the whites and the blacks of their nation and overcome the many years of racial oppression. Many of you saw *Invictus* and know the story of how Mandela persuades the country's national rugby team to integrate and compete for the World Cup rugby championship. The Springboks had been a symbol of white supremacy and South African blacks had cheered against them. But with Mandela's urging, the players work out their differences, and to the surprise of everyone, they win the world championship. And all of South Africa, white and black, celebrate together.

As Mandela's car leaves the championship scene, we hear his voice reciting William Ernest Henley's poem, *Invictus*:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Such was the introduction for many people to the indomitable spirit of Nelson Mandela. But let me tell you of his life underlying that crucial moment of victory. Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was

born in 1918, in South Africa. His father was a chief of the Thembu tribe and was also an advisor to the king. Nelson was groomed to counsel the rulers of his tribe, however his father lost his fortune and chieftainship, leaving his family impoverished.

When he was young, Nelson's mother became a Christian and was given the Christian name of Fanny. So Nelson was baptized in the Methodist Church. Through the encouragement of several Christians, Nelson's father was persuaded to send him to the Methodist mission school at age seven. No one else in his family had attended school before.

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world. A good head and good heart are always a formidable combination. But when you add to that a literate tongue or pen, then you have something very special.”

Nelson's father died when he was nine years old and he was sent to live with the regent of the Thembu people. The town was a Methodist mission outpost. The regent took his Methodist faith seriously, and Nelson saw that many of the achievements of the Africans came about through the mission activity of the church.

Nelson also learned about leadership from observing the regent and the democracy he practiced. The regent held open meetings where all people could speak up and were considered equal in their opinions. Nelson learned to listen to everyone before venturing his opinion. He learned some crucial and wise lessons regarding leadership.

“A leader is like a shepherd. He stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind. I also learned that real leaders must be ready to sacrifice all for the freedom of their people.”

Mandela was deeply shaped by his Methodist roots. As a teenager, Nelson was sent to a Methodist boarding school. From there he went to a Methodist secondary school, and after that to the University College of Fort Hare, where he lived in Wesley House. Outside of school, however, Nelson learned several things. He learned that no matter how far a black man advanced, he was still considered inferior to even the lowest white man. His country was ruled by a white minority, a country which was an outcast in the international community because of its constitutional system of racism. Yet, through the influence of friends, Nelson also learned that the path of Jesus Christ could help him overcome the racism of his land.

“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

Nelson wanted to be a lawyer, so he worked in a law firm and went to school at the same time. He was so poor that he often walked the six miles to town to work and then six miles back in the evening so that he didn't have to pay bus fare. Often he went for days with barely more than a

mouthful of food and without a change of clothing. He wore the same suit every day for almost five years, until there were more patches than suit.

At age 24, Nelson finally had his Bachelor of Arts degree and began studying law. At that time, he became very active in the African freedom movement with the Youth League of the African National Congress, or ANC.

“I cannot pinpoint a moment when I knew that I would spend my life in the liberation struggle. To be an African in South Africa means that one is politicized from the moment of one’s birth. An African child is born in an Africans Only hospital, taken home in an Africans Only bus, lives in an Africans Only area, and attends Africans Only schools, if he attends school at all. When he grows up, he can hold Africans Only jobs, rent a house in Africans Only townships, ride Africans Only trains, and be stopped at any time of the day or night and be thrown into jail. I had no epiphany, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities, a thousand unremembered moments, produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people.”¹

Although Mandela felt God calling him to devote his life to politics, his views were clearly influenced by his Christian upbringing. Mandela believed that in Christ all human beings are free to become the people God created them to be. Galatians chapter 3 says, “In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” That freedom, however, entails responsibility. As Paul says of Galatians 5: “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another.” Nelson Mandela had a vision of a South Africa where there was freedom and equal opportunity for all.

When the National Party won the all-white election in 1948 under a platform of apartheid, the African National Congress began advocating boycotts, strikes, civil disobedience and non-cooperation as official policy. The National Party was denying the most basic and democratic human rights to 87% of South Africa’s population.

“What is apartheid? It literally means ‘apartness,’ and it represented the oppressive system of all the laws and regulations that had kept Africans in an inferior position to whites for centuries. The segregation of the past 300 years was consolidated into a monolithic system that was diabolical in its detail and overwhelming in its power. The premise of apartheid was that whites were superior to Africans and Coloureds, and the function of it was to entrench white supremacy forever.”²

Nelson Mandela traveled the country, organizing resistance to legislation discriminatory to Africans, coloured and Indians. He opened a law practice in Johannesburg and became a deputy president of the African National Congress in 1952. Consequently, Mandela was banned, arrested and imprisoned.

When the Republic of South Africa was formed in 1961, freeing South Africa from British rule, Mandela challenged the apartheid regime to convene a convention representative of all Africans to form a new constitution based on democratic principles. As a result, Mandela became a wanted man and was forced to live apart from his family, always traveling, adopting different disguises. Eventually, Mandela was arrested and charged with sabotage. He made this statement at the trial:

“I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.”³

Mandela was sentenced to life in prison and started his prison years in the notorious Robben Island Prison, a maximum security prison on a small island off the coast near Cape Town. Several times Mandela rejected offers of release based on certain conditions, stating that only free men can negotiate. The white government, in a futile attempt to diminish his reputation, never released photos of Mandela during his 27 years of captivity.

Mandela continued to fight against injustice in prison. He fought for better working conditions, better food, more visits and letters, the ability to study, more exercise and less hard labor. Protesting prison conditions was simply an extension of his fight against apartheid. And in his patient protests, he learned.

“One of the things I learned when I was negotiating was that until I changed myself, I could not change others.”

All prisoners were required to attend church services every Sunday. According to Mandela, few of the men were religious, but they didn't mind the long sermons because they were able to be outside. Of course, the ministers were all white men. Mandela remembers one preacher who was nervous and gloomy who preached over and over the importance of reconciliation, implying that it was the blacks who needed to be reconciled to the whites. One Sunday during his sermon, one of the prisoners called out, “You're preaching reconciliation to the wrong people. We've been seeking reconciliation for the past 75 years!” The prisoners never saw that preacher again.

Meanwhile, in the 1980's, governments around the world began to adopt economic and other sanctions on South Africa's apartheid regime. South Africa's economy was in a deep depression. After P. W. Botha resigned as state president in 1989, his successor, F. W. de Klerk, affirmed his commitment to change and reform. One evening de Klerk called Mandela to a secret meeting and informed him that, like it or not, he was going to be released the very next day. When he walked out, 25 years ago this year, people were able to see him for the first time in a quarter century.

Mandela plunged right back into the struggle, his life's work, striving to attain the goals he and others had set out almost four decades earlier. But in his years in prison, he had learned a most valuable Christian virtue. His life forward was characterized by forgiveness and charity:

“As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.”

And he never considered himself to be anything special. He was one who ran the race God had set before him – and he simply refused to stop.

“Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again. I am not a saint, unless you think of a saint as a sinner who keeps on trying.”

Four years later, on May 10, 1994, Mandela was inaugurated as the first democratically elected State President of South Africa. In 1993 he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize along with F. W. de Klerk. Nelson Mandela never wavered in his devotion to democracy, equality and learning. Despite terrible provocation, he never answered racism with racism. He was never bitter but always sought reconciliation. Because of Mandela’s strong grounding in the Christian faith through his experiences in Methodist missions and schools, Mandela never tired of proclaiming that there is neither black nor white, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus.

The most tangible sign of that reconciling love is the table of Jesus Christ. At this table, all differences are set aside and we are united in the love God has for us all. Christ invites you to his table. And so I ask you, in a world where hatred and bitterness prevail, will you be an advocate for reconciliation? In a yet-divided country, will you claim a faith that is so color-blind that when you look from face to face, you see the eyes of God? In families where bonds of love are torn, will you allow God to change your heart so that you can forgive and start anew?

“I have walked that long walk to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended. The struggle is my life.”⁴

The struggle is your life as well. Will you join Nelson Mandela on that long march for freedom for all?

May we pray? Lord God, we seek to be one in the Spirit and one in our Lord. As we come to Christ’s table, may we know that there are no longer slave nor free, Jew or Greek, male or female, for we are now one in Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Little, Brown and Company, 1994, p. 95.

2. Ibid, p. 111.

3. *Nelson Mandela Speaks; Forging a Democratic Nonracial South Africa*, New York, Pathfinder, 1993, p. 34.

4. *Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 625.