

# Moral Dissenters Are a Necessity for the Destiny of Democracy

Edited text from rough-draft preaching manuscript.  
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gathered civil disobedience witnesses arrested at Moral Mondays # 1-8, April 29-June 24, 2013.

## Psalm 94:16-20

*<sup>16</sup> Who will rise up for me against the evildoers? or who will stand up for me against the workers of iniquity? King James Version*

## Luke 4:16-19

*<sup>16-19</sup> He came to Nazareth where he had been reared. As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place. When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,*

*God's Spirit is on me;*

*He's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,  
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set the burdened and battered free, to announce, "This is God's year to act!"*

The Message Bible

The psalmist raises a question for the ages in a time of political oppression and systematic injustice, in a time when those in power are so drunk with that power that they are using it in ways that are hurting the vulnerable...

*<sup>16</sup> Who will rise up for me against the evildoers? or who will stand up for me against the workers of iniquity?*

Who will dissent? Who will challenge what's going on, said the psalmist. If God had not stood up, nobody would have dissented! Everybody would have just gone along to get along. In other words,

the tragedy of the text in Psalm 94 is that no one chose to engage in moral dissent against the wrongs of injustice.

In Luke's text, Jesus rises as a dissenter in the middle of a ghetto city called Nazareth that existed in the midst of Roman domination. It was a society of deep divisions and social economic stratification. Author Phillip Esler says that the 1% ruled with pride and arrogance over the 99%; Social Darwinism was the order of the day. It was a time when the sick were left to fend for themselves; the jobless were called by Cicero "the dregs of the city;" the poor were seen as a nuisance and not neighbors by the ruling wealthy and political elites.

Jesus' first sermon raised a moral dissent! Jesus declared that those pushed to the side by the political powers of his day and by the religionists who supported those political power, those dismissed, disdained, and disregarded by the politics of the day were in fact the CENTER of God's moral agenda and ways of righteousness!

The poor in Luke's text are in Greek the *potochos*, those who had been MADE poor by systematic policies and decision of those in power. The gospel writer could have used three other words for poor that referred to those down on their luck or just scraping by. But the writer chose the word *potochos* to make clear to the readers of the day that the Roman Empire had pushed these people into unjust wretchedness for the Empire's own gain.

To these poor Jesus brings good news, which is dissent to the bad news of the ruling order, declaring:

*God's Spirit is on me;  
he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,  
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and  
recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set the burdened and battered free,  
to announce, "This is God's year to act!"*

It's God's way of saying: There is another way, a Better Way, and I stand in contrast and dissent to the ways of domination, destruction, and injustice.

Moral dissent is not just the call of the psalmist or the stance of Jesus back then. It has been in our history and is still our calling today. In order to insure the destiny of this state this nation, this democracy lives in a way that moves toward justice and a more perfect union, for the good of the whole.

Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison once was rescued from being lynched by a pro-slavery mob when the mayor of Boston had him thrown into jail. While incarcerated, Garrison wrote on the wall of his cell:

*Wm. Lloyd Garrison was put into this cell Wednesday afternoon, October 21, 1835, to save him from the violence of a 'respectable and influential' mob, who sought to destroy him for preaching the abominable and dangerous doctrine that 'all men are created equal.*

Neither persecution nor time diminished Garrison's radicalism.

In 1846, when Mexican forces had fired on American troops that had been sent across the disputed Mexican border to provoke such an incident, President James Knox Polk asked Congress for a Declaration of War. "American blood," he proclaimed, "had been shed on American soil." A freshman congressman from Illinois dissented, sarcastically criticizing the President's policy by introducing the so-called "Spot Resolution," which would have required Polk to travel to Mexico to point out the exact spot on "American soil" where this had taken place. The resolution was defeated and it is probable that Polk seriously questioned Congressman Abraham Lincoln's patriotism.

Henry David Thoreau, also protesting the war with Mexico, refused to pay a poll tax because he could not in good conscience support an imperialistic government that sought to expand the institution of slavery into new territory. He was arrested and later, after his release, he wrote his influential essay, "On Resistance to Civil Government." When there is an unjust law, Thoreau wrote, like laws legalizing the institution of slavery, then it is the *duty* of every just man to break that law. A true patriot would not allow injustice to stand. Thoreau's friend, Ralph Waldo Emerson, visited him the night he spent in jail. "Henry," he asked, somewhat scandalized by Thoreau's outrageous behavior, "what are you doing in there?" To which Thoreau purportedly replied, "Ralph, what are *you* doing out there?" Thoreau engaged in moral dissent.

In 1896, Supreme Court Justice John Harlan provided a vote of moral constitutional dissent:

*In the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our constitution is colorblind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among*

*citizens. In respect of civil rights, all citizens are equal before the law. The humblest is the peer of the most powerful...The arbitrary separation of citizens on the basis of race, while they are on a public highway, is a badge of servitude wholly inconsistent with the civil freedom and the equality before the law established by the Constitution. It cannot be justified upon any legal grounds.*

Carl Schurz, former Civil War officer and Secretary of the Interior, denounced American Imperialism in 1899 after we had taken over the Philippines and Puerto Rico as a result of the Spanish-American War. Addressing an audience at the University of Chicago, he said:

*Certainly every patriotic citizen will always be ready, if need be, to fight and to die under his flag wherever it may wave in justice and for the best interests of the country. But...woe to the republic if it should ever be without citizens patriotic and brave enough to defy the demagogues' cry and to haul down the flag wherever it may be raised not in justice and not for the best interests of the country.*

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 50 years ago and under heavy criticism, wrote about the necessity of moral dissent from his cell in the Birmingham, Alabama jail:

*But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns: and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom far beyond my own hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.*

*Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.*

*But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.' Was not Amos an extremist for justice: 'Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.' Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: 'I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.' Was not Martin Luther an extremist: 'Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God.' And John Bunyan: 'I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.' Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.*

Just this past week, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg became the voice of moral and constitutional dissent when she wrote about the terrible Voting Rights Act (VRA) decision by the majority:

*Congress approached the 2006 reauthorization of the VRA with great care and seriousness. The same cannot be said of the Court's opinion today. The Court makes no genuine attempt to engage with the massive legislative record that Congress assembled. Instead, it relies on increases in voter registration and turnout as if that were the whole story. One would expect more from an opinion striking at the heart of the Nation's signal piece of civil-rights legislation.*

Driving her point further, Ginsburg wrote:

*Hubris is a fit word for today's demolition of the VRA...throwing out preclearance [the Section Four formula] when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.*

Usually SCOTUS opinions draw heavily from past court decisions, and Ginsburg's is no exception. But she also reminded the court of the Bloody Sunday campaign for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, and quoted Martin Luther King's hopeful determination when he said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Ginsburg also quoted Shakespeare, telling the Court that "what's past is prologue," and the Spanish-American poet and philosopher George Santayana, who said "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Moral dissenters are in good company! So many more could be listed: Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Cesar Chavez--whose slogan is a rallying cry for those who stand against the forces of injustice-- "Sí, se puede" (Spanish for "Yes, one can" or, roughly, "Yes, it can be done").

And in this moment in history we are being called once again to answer the question of the psalmist

*<sup>16</sup> Who will rise up for me against the evildoers? or who will stand up for me against the workers of iniquity? King James Version*

We are being called by God to receive the anointing of the Spirit to declare the message of good news to the poor, over against the bad news of domination. SEND ME to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

#### MORAL DISSENTERS ARE A NECESSITY!

Somebody must stand and say it doesn't matter what party is in power, who has a political supermajority. There are some things that transcend political majorities and mere majority politics and the narrow categories of liberal v. conservative. There are some things that must be challenged because they are wrong, extreme, and immoral:

It is extreme for any state but especially in a southern state to make it harder for citizens to vote!

It is extreme to cut Medicaid for more than 500,000 people, many of them children!

It is extreme to raise taxes on 900,000 poor and middle-class citizens in order to cut taxes for the state's 23 wealthiest families!

It is extreme to end unemployment benefits for 170,000 people who have lost jobs through no fault of their own! Tomorrow, July 1, 70,000 of our neighbors will wake up to find their federal unemployment benefit taken completely away by the spiteful leaders of our legislature.

It is extreme to resegregate our schools and eliminate preschool for more than 30,000 poor children!

It is extreme to play Fracking for Dollars with our ground water!

It is extreme to dismantle our public schools in order to hand them over private companies!

One of the moral dissenters of our Forward Together movement wrote this to me the day before our last Moral Monday:

*What manner of Christian takes the basic unemployment subsistence away from their brothers and sisters so that they may pay off the government's debt early?*

*What manner of Christian takes away health care for their elders, their brothers and sisters, their neighbors, their family, because they don't like some African-American leader? Who punishes a dislike by creating suffering among their own people?*

*What manner of Christian punishes 7 and 8 year old children by taking their teacher's aide from them?*

*What manner of Christian increases the tax burden of the poor and middle class while lowering it on the wealthy at a time when the wealth in our nation is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands?*

*What manner of Christian other than one drunken with power does these things to their people?*

Yes, it is a necessity for the destiny of our democracy that we realize we have to look at policy through the moral lens of justice for all and through the constitutional principle of the common good. And when we see clearly, we have to raise our dissent.

Keeping hundreds of thousands of children from seeing a doctor when they are sick is not just bad policy; it is immoral. Kicking hard-working people who lost jobs through no fault of their own off of unemployment benefits to give tax cuts to the very wealthy is not just bad policy; it's against the common good.

We must raise our dissent, knowing that whether it is heard now or later, history has shown that moral dissent sows the seeds of change and justice that eventually blossom on the landscape of our democracy.

We must raise our moral dissent because it is our calling to do so!

The movement in North Carolina is about the moral fabric of our entire society. People who are Black, white, Hispanic, young, and old are all coming together to fight against a dangerous agenda of extremism. We are fighting for the type of democracy that places the common good at the center of public policy: We must have a society that articulates the connection between the moral call for justice and the constitutional call for the common good.

The greatest myth of our time is the notion that extreme policies harm a small subset of people, such as people of color. However, these policies harm us all. What we've seen in North Carolina and other parts of the country is wealthy extremists subtly playing on the fears of working-class and white people. We've seen ultraconservative politicians (and donors) adopting a divide-and-conquer strategy, causing many people to vote against their own interests. Our job is to unpack the truth about these extreme policies and how they adversely impact ALL people.

Dissenters help destroy the myths of delusion and domination. And so I'm glad tonight to be a part of this generation moral dissenters! I'm glad to be among those who give voice and spirit and bodies to the cause of justice! I'm glad because it's our turn now! Others have come before us and they fought the fights of their day.

The nightmare of regressive public policy and mean oppressive politics takes us in the wrong direction. We are here today because we know there is a Better Way. We have a Better Agenda.

We believe in a progressive positive vision that pushes us FORWARD.

The Better Way says: If our values are right and our budgets are just, we can support and pay our teachers and we can build the future for all of our children-- red, yellow, black, white, rural, and urban. They all can be educated and receive a high-quality, constitutional, well-funded, diverse public education.

The Better Way says: If the wealthy pay their fair share, we can have surplus budgets not deficits.

The Better Way says: We can pay hard-working people a living wage and insure that workers have collective bargaining and workers' rights. We can insure the unemployed.

The Better Way says: We can use global technology, green economy, and targeted economic and infrastructure investment to access education and create jobs to address the ugly realities of poverty, if we see the poor as our neighbors and remember that we are our brother's and sister's keeper.

The Better Way says: The moral calling of our state and nation is not to look down and disdain the poor but to insure strong safety nets that lift up the poor.

The Better Way says: The sick can have adequate health care. The environment can be protected. The injustices of our judicial systems can be corrected and fixed.

The Better Way says: We can stop the Ponzi schemes of Wall Street predatory lending and housing foreclosures. We can make the banks do right, lend right, treat people right, and rebuild our communities.

The Better Way says: We can reject hate and division and mean attempts to write people out of constitutional protections because of race, creed, or sexual orientation.

The Better Way says: Respect the dignity of all people! We can love all people; we can see all people as God's creations.

The Better Way says: We can say NO to those who want to limit participation in our democracy and resegregate voting.

The Better Way says: A nation of immigrants can welcome immigrants rather than abuse them, arrest them, and abandon them.

So let's us declare in this moment together, we the people will work toward a Better Way. We still believe in E Pluribus Unum--out of the many, one. If we stand up in this moment, there will be a day when our children's children will follow our memory because we did not give up on...the Better Way.

So we cannot rest. This is no time for apathy. The Better Way requires that we fight back! We must stand up, get up, wakeup, speak up, and...we must walk by faith and not by sight!

We are called to stand up and not bow down!

We must believe that difficulties can lead to deliverance!

We can't give in to evil polices!

We must stands up to pharaoh!

We must speak truth to power!

We must take on the Goliath of arrogant politics!

We must refuse to accept sinister situations!

We must refuse to be slaves to other folk's oppression!

We must refuse to be chattel property of injustice!

By faith, we have the courage to be. By faith, we go from strength to strength. By faith, plans to kill us actually make us live. We never let danger defeat us. In the face of frontal attacks on our rights, we are called to change situations, not accept them. We are called to stand up and not bow down.

Faith and moving forward is the only way to save our souls and the soul of this nation. Faith is keeping our eyes on the prize of justice, knowing that there is...

NO challenge that can't be met,

NO mountain that can't be climbed,

NO valley that can't be crossed,

NO enemy that can't be defeated,

NO darkness that can't be overcome,

NO pressure that can't be pushed through,

NO regressive political power that can't be overturned!

I tell you, my brothers and sisters, in this moment the soul of our state and the destiny of our society is at stake. Do we want to keep pressing toward God's vision of a just wholesome society or do we want to step backwards? This is the question before us. I believe that somebody wants what God wants. The Better Way says:

Justice is better than injustice.

Love is better than hate.

Hope is better than despair.

Community is better than division.

Peace is better than war.

The good of the whole is better than the whims of the few.

Common ground is better than callous greed.

Promoting the general welfare is better than protecting wealth at expense of the poor.

Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is better than lust, unfairness, and the pursuit of greed.

God wants everybody--red, yellow, Black, and white--taken care of. God wants true community and more togetherness, not more separateness. God wants justice.

We can't turn back now. It was too hard to get the rights and progress we have now and yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet come to the place for which our fathers sighed? Too many prayers were prayed to get where we are. Too many lives were sacrificed. Too much blood, too many tears. We can't turn back now. Not just in North Carolina, but in our world. This is why any regressive action that cuts at the heart of our community is wrong on a deep, moral level. We are trying to get somewhere, to where the lion lies down with the lamb. Where no one will have a need; where all are seen as special and worthy of attention. In order for this to happen, there must be a committed crowd that will say in word and deed:

**FORWARD TOGETHER, NOT ONE STEP BACK!**

This must be our stance. **FORWARD TOGETHER, NOT ONE STEP BACK!**

So we declare before God to this state and before all America that when it comes to our rights ordained by God and guaranteed by the constitution, we will never lose the faith, and we will never, ever, ever turn back.

Weeping may endure for a night. Mean politicians may endure for a night. Tea parties may endure for a night. But we still believe joy comes in the morning!

We will never lose our faith. We might have some dark Fridays. Crucified on Friday, dark Fridays--socially dark, politically dark, economically dark Fridays. But we will not lose our faith, because we know that dark Fridays have to give way to bright Sunday morning resurrections. We shall overcome. We shall survive. God's vision, God's dream will win out Justice will win. Truth will live.

We will not be divided or defeated. The better way will triumph we shall be called repairers of the broken places. Crooked places will be straightened out; rough places will be made smooth. God's glory, God's power, God's way shall be revealed. In this moment, we must redouble our efforts and declare in both words and deeds:

FORWARD TOGETHER, NOT ONE STEP BACK!

WE WILL NOT BE DIVIDED OR DEFEATED!