



REIMAGINING AND REMAKING SERIES

IN THE BALANCE

APRIL 26 | REV. T. J. FITZGERALD

Now, this may come as a shock to you all, but ministers do exist in places other than their church and their pulpit. Just want to warn you. And some of you have discovered this. If you have seen me at the Y next door, taking a single, double, triple, quadruple take, "Is that Reverend TJ there, benching 400 pounds? Could it be?" No, it's no more than 350. It's no more than... But last week after church, I was in a place other than here. It was after the gym, of course. And I picked up some to go dinner for friends of mine who have two kids under two. So they got a lot going on. Their house is a little bit down Mockingbird. And when I arrived, their son, their older child was about 18, 19 months, was sitting down for his dinner. He's an active fellow.

All his plateware has to have suction cups on it to the table. Some of you know these guys. And there he was with his mac and cheese and these amazing dinosaur shaped sweet potato cakes. I'm like, "When can I get some of that? What is going on?" Things are a lot better now. I think I had dinosaur shaped chicken nuggets, but that's a whole... Yeah, that's a thing. Dino nugs. I digress. It was amazing. And the grownups there, we had our takeout and we're eating. And afterwards, my friend's son definitely needed a bath. He was a little sweaty, he was very mac and cheesy, all those things. And just before he could get up the stairs with mom for the bath, dear old dad, my friend, took the fresh baked, warm chocolate cookies out of the microwave that were for the adults.

He just caught them with his eye. And in a moment, I could see it on his face, "They do have cookies when I'm upstairs. It's all true. They're holding out on me, those adults." And so we did what any loving grownups would do. We shared. And so he had some of mom's cookie, and then he got some of dad's cookie. And as he's got hands full of cookies, he's looking at Uncle TJ's cookie and he's like, "I want that too." So he started eyeing it too. The lesson that I was getting from this is that he understood cookies at a very young age, and also fairness and limited resources at this young age. In fact, when

we teach kids, "All gone," that's one of their first lessons in limited resources. Some studies show actually, as soon as a year old, children are aware of this process, this fact of life, and some of those early childhood lessons do stick around.

Ernest McMillan, the author of our reading and one of the greatest advocates for civil rights that Dallas has ever seen died at the end of March. And for that, to his family, I send you all love and grace at this time. This was after a storied and a beautiful life, well lived, fighting on behalf of others and those that he loved most in the world. In an interview, actually with our own Jerry Hawkins sponsored by The Sixth Floor Museum, Ernest explained he grew up in what he called Short North Dallas, which was north of the city, but not all the way up, not all the way to the burbs. He lived in the part of town that was called Freedman's town, built by those who'd been enslaved and where their families could settle and thrive.

When I listened to this interview, I think one of the most striking things I heard Ernest say was that in his early life, his words, he, quote "only experienced the positives of segregation." He appreciated that as a tiny tot, his words, he could walk around his town in safety. He said he felt recognized and loved and connected to his neighbors and around his family in his community, in this culture of care and love. Those are my words now. His grandfather founded the first hospital in that town and his dad was a pastor there. So generations of his family helped to build the feeling in that town. They were part of setting the culture there. It was bordered by downtown to the south, Little Mexico on one side, Turtle Creek on the other, and then mansions and mansions to the east.

In that town, in that city within a city, there were two cab companies, a theater, a public library, hotels, rooming houses, community centers, barber shops, churches, a hospital, dance halls, newspapers, schools, service stations, and also a YMCA that hosted a lot of public events and including community organizing, things like that. It was a city unto itself. Today, that area is called State Thomas. Anyone spend any time there? Okay. Yeah. Those are the two main streets in the middle of the neighborhood. It's how it got its name now. And now there are sports bars there filled with hockey fans and things like that. You can also get a \$10 coffee there now in that neighborhood, I have found. The culture has changed some there.

I was... Ernest talking about this little city when I was listening to it, about this neighborhood, it helped me to see it even more clearly, to feel the culture of fondness and of comfort that he knew in his youth. And it made me wonder about what it might have meant to him to try later in life to build that, to rebuild that again for himself, for those he loved, for those he didn't even know, into a stronger, a bigger, a more embracing or [foreign language 00:07:09]. That's a better word for embracing a superior word, I think, for others. Now, one place that had a distinct culture in the 1960s was/is Dallas, Texas USA. I think a lot of you were here then or knew a lot about it. Ernest came back home to Dallas from Georgia where he had been at Morehouse and he was helping to register voters and being trained as a community organizer.

He came to Dallas in the late '60s to lead the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee chapter here. SNCC, as it was known, was viewed by the police and by federal agents in Dallas as a real threat.

J. Edgar Hoover himself had his eyes on this place. Some of the first things he did was hold community meetings though. When you joined SNCC in Dallas, the first thing they had you do was study and read. And then you started learning what was happening in your community, listening, having community meetings. And at those meetings in Oak Cliff and South Dallas, Ernest started listening to what the people were really concerned about. Does anyone want to guess what the main thing in that time really was for the people in Oak Cliff and South Dallas? What was their concern?

Someone said it. Food. Yep. Food insecurity. The more things change. Yeah. You see, OK Supermarkets who was there at the time was the only supermarket available. And they sold subpar foods at inflated prices, significantly inflated prices, and they refused to hire people in the neighborhood. They wouldn't do it. And so Ernest and his friends thought about this, "What is the best way to address this issue of unfair treatment and food provision? What's the approach that's appropriate without causing too much trouble? How do we make our point? What's the balanced approach here?" So he organized students and other people, young people, to go into OK Supermarkets, walk up to the deli counter, order some cold cuts sliced up or some other cuts of beef, look at it and then say, "You know what? Yeah, I'm good. I don't really want it." And walk right out.

And they started doing this over and over. But then reports are, "Some students," as Ernest put it, "Squeezed some tomatoes a little too hard." And also someone reported that they saw him drop a gallon of milk, a \$1.99 gallon of milk. And for this, he was charged with a property crime, a felony of destruction of property valued over \$50. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison. And the prosecutor, when the sentence came down, said, "Well, I would've tried to get you 20." That was the world in the '60s for folks. When he was bonded out, he had to flee New York... He had to flee Texas. He went to New York, then he went to Canada to avoid capture, and then he had to go all the way to Ghana for fear of his life. This was the time in the '60s when people who were fighting for justice who looked a lot like Ernest McMillan were in a lot of danger for their life, were being killed.

Even the jailer who brought Ernest into the jail said, "We've got a pine box waiting for you." This was the reality of his life and what he needed to do to stay safe. He did eventually return after being duped into coming back after speaking at the World Council of Churches in Greenwich, Connecticut. He got a phone call that apparently he did not have permission to be there and he needed to sneak back to Texas, but he was apprehended on the way and charged and he had to plead guilty to charges that amounted to smoking in a non-smoking area, a violation of the Draft Services Act, and a possession of a lawfully obtained handgun. These were the final charges that stuck.

But at his sentencing, he was able to read a statement that ended like this, "How are we to account for the very fact that people starve every day in this nation, that millions are without even the simplest basic shelter, while the tiny handful grow fat and flabby from the spoils of corporate riches. Why is it that thousands die simply because they can't afford proper medical attention while others are able to maintain the very best in personal healthcare? What reasons exist that can explain the fact that every man ever put to death in gas chambers or in electric chairs are poor people, whereas the rich and the super rich rarely, if ever, serve prison time at all." And he ended by saying this, "The only hope for

change lies and the resourcefulness and successful struggle of all oppressed people united in a common effort for liberation in our times."

Then he surrendered and started to do the 10 years which he had been sentenced. Do you ever feel like it's just stacked against you in your life? Do you ever feel like nothing you've ever done is deserving of the treatment you're actually getting? Yeah. Do you ever feel like there are just so many things coming at you all the time that on God's green acre, you could never address them all? You ever have that feeling in just one week of being alive right now? I don't. I'm just asking if you do. I'm just... I'll tell you the truth, guys. Every time I get up here, I wonder how much of reminding you all even need about what's going on around us and how much more reminding you need of what beautiful, precious, wonderful children of this world you really are. I think sometimes you need to hear that, that you're loved because religion, and I'm just talking about religion now, is being used in schools, right?

In hospitals, yes. In capitals across the country, in commerce, religion is being used to harm people, being weaponized. Some of the hardest experiences I've had is just a decent human being, let alone your minister. Some of the most troubling and painful things I've ever heard are about the misuse, the weaponization of religion against you, against the people you love and against this world, because religion, it's just one small facet of faith. It's one glimpse of our deeper spirituality and connection, and it takes so much care. It takes so much in our day to balance, to hold our faith in things, our faith in people, our faith in the world, in institutions around us, maybe even our faith in God when we see a culture where people also ostensibly of faith want more and more power, want more and more exclusion, want more and more of their resources that reflect only their brand of religion.

In college, Ernest had the thought in the '60s that I think a lot of people had. He saw this glimmer, this change of hope that was coming that he'd be part of an instant change. He called it a prayer fire. I love that. A prayer fire, sweeping the nation, a momentous culture shift, and a lot changed, I know that, but a lot did not. And some of the changes that did happen are being rolled back now and have been. And Ernest kept on working through for something greater in his vision. You see, Jerry let me borrow his copy of *Standing*, a book I commend to all of you, which is the book Ernest wrote about the 1960s and his being a leader there and being incarcerated then so that I could work on this sermon and his copy is inscribed by Ernest McMillan. I'd never dream of reading you the whole inscription because it's private, but I will say what Ernest blessed Jerry's volume with was the encouragement to help to continue to build the beloved community.

Dr. King himself breathed a new fire, a new life into this idea of the beloved community. And I know I preach about it all the time and I will not stop. You cannot stop me. The beloved community was an idea that got life from Josiah Royce at Harvard Divinity School, was held by Howard Thurman, brought into this group called... About reconciliation, about the fellowship of reconciliation. And that's where King really took hold of it. He breathed life into it in a way that no one else had. He brought a theological understanding to what the beloved community really meant. And he told everyone, "It was going to take a lot of faith, but it was going to take just as much, if not more action." See, the heart of

the beloved community is the heart of nature, is the heart of twin trees on separate banks, maybe rooted differently, but reaching across waters and divides to come together.

It is the arc of the moral universe. It is the heart of a history over any period of long enough time. It's not justice and it's not only fairness. It is the holy work of a balance, of balancing the needs of people with the possibility of meeting the needs. I tell you now, some of the greatest hurts in the world at their core are a collection of unmet needs, right? Years after Ernest's fateful protests at the OK Supermarkets, he helped organize funding a buying group from Atlanta to purchase and buy out OK Supermarkets by a group that would then treat the neighbors fairly. He used his ingenuity and capital to build and make a difference in his community to find this balance because we better make no mistake about it. And I want to be clear, capital and those who have it and know how to use it and build it, you are in the beloved community too and thank you because to make this real, to help build the beloved community and to make a culture of care and understanding real takes all of us, all of our skills.

His words again, "The only hope, the only hope for change lies and the resoluteness and successful struggle of all oppressed people united in a common effort for liberation in our times." And when I asked if anyone was feeling like there's too much going on in your life that if you've ever felt that things are stacked against you, it may not be big things, but if you are feeling that nip of the ringer a little bit, you are feeling that little bit of oppression. That is oppression working on you. And if you are someone who has dealt with great deal more oppression, I hear you, I see you, but we are in this together.

See, to be in the beloved community... By the way, you're all in the beloved community, whether you like it or not, but to be in it, that's just theology, friends, to be in it in a way that helps everybody, including yourself and others that won't grind you down with the oppression of the constancy of these pains is to accept that we're bound together in a common effort and a common fate rooted, yes, in different places, perhaps across this river, yet finding ways of growth and flourishing together to come across difference and to embrace one another. And it's easy, I know it is easy to think and to believe, "We just need a few more voters in this one district to accomplish this," or, "That we just need a little bit less hate in someone else's heart." Good luck with that. "We just need more money for these certain little causes over here. We just need a little less religion and public life." Don't do this, friends. Don't give away your spirit by inches.

We need all of it because that's not balance that game. That's a teeter-totter. What would it be like? Think differently. What would it be like if today your children or all the children in this church that we just saw go to classes, if all of them could walk through their entire day, school, city, church, supermarkets, everywhere, being appreciated, being loved, being cared for, as Ernest put it, as tiny tots, if the entire culture that holds these kids changed to accomplish that, if the world saw them as their own children too. I know a lot of our kids have a hard time, and I'm just holding it together up here when I think about them. Ernest knew what that felt like, believed that we all could know what it felt like again, but not for his sake, for all of our sakes.

But doing this takes faith, something deeper sometimes than religion. It takes faith. It takes a faith in something beyond strategy, beyond mere hope. It takes faith, beyond politics, beyond partisanship, beyond cynicism, and beyond scolding. Building the beloved community is the work of a faithful people who are able to love our enemies as ourselves while telling them we do not like what they are doing. Building the beloved community is work for a faithful people who are able to imagine a future for all where none lose their life for inability to afford food or healthcare or take your pick. Inability to pay should not be a life sentence in this country. Can I hear you people? Building the beloved community is work for a faithful people because we know that difference is beautiful and not a witness because people of faith know that we nourish one another with our love and understanding because the belief in real balance, in real equity, is the language of a loving God, of an ordered universe, of the moral arc of history.

It is what is written in our hearts louder and clearer than any text you're ever going to find anywhere else. It is in born to us. We see it, we know it, and we want it to be better. Friends, this church has been trying to change the culture of the city for more than a century, and it has done a lot. I know, I know, but we're not done. We are never done. We are building the beloved community together at our kitchen tables as much as at this pulpit, at the Lakeside cleanup the community service does as much as at the courts of law, in the classrooms, in the streets, in the supermarkets. Wherever we are, a people of faith build the beloved community with all we do, with all we are, we can do that so that all are seen, valued and loved from a tiny tot to the end of a blessed, courageous life, well lived like Ernest McMillan's himself. This is the task we inherit, friends. This is our chance. It is our charge and may it ever be so. Blessed be and amen.