

*Soulful Citizenship: We the People*  
Excerpts from Exodus 3 and 4

A woman named Sylvia McLaughlin died in Berkeley this week. She was 99. I had never heard of her before, but on the radio show I was listening to, people talked about her with great respect and affection. They called her one of the founders of today's environmentalist movement today—which seems like a pretty big thing to say. Really? Look at her—she looks like a nice person, but much too much like you or me to be someone so powerful!

In 1961, Sylvia McLaughlin heard that the city she lived in, Berkeley, had planned to fill in 2,000 acres of the San Francisco Bay, so they could use it for development. Maybe you remember: the Bay used to be much more polluted than it is now. They used to dump sewage along its shores. All of the land around it was privately owned. If an owner wanted to put condos, or a factory, on their land, all they had to do was get a local permit. Every year the bay shrank a little more, as businesses filled it in to grab a little more usable land.

There were, literally, no environmental laws at the time to protect the shoreline. Sylvia and two of her friends saw a picture in the newspaper that showed the San Francisco Bay shrinking to the size of a narrow shipping channel by 2020. They were were outraged. It seemed so wrong to them that the government would not take control over protecting this public resource. They went to the men they knew in local government, who said that what they were suggesting was impossible. “You're too naive to understand how things work,” the powerful people said.

So, these three women started an organization called Save the Bay. They invited others to join them; they made the dues for belonging to the movement \$1 a year. And thousands of people joined. They wrote letters; they called local and state officials. They were determined, but the thing people remember about Sylvia McLaughlin is that she was always kind. One of the people she lobbied said this week, “She had this power of conviction but she expressed it in such a gracious way that you felt you would disappoint her if you didn't do what she wanted.”

And the women didn't stop, no matter how many times they got frustrated or shut down. They kept talking to people, writing letters, showing up at hearings and public events. Eventually Save the Bay convinced the California Legislature to outlaw the expansion of development into San Francisco Bay. The dumping stopped, preserving the bay not only for those three women, but for everyone.

I'm not asking you to agree with Sylvia McLaughlin's politics; you may not. Personally, when I heard her story this week, I thought, “Wow, that's impressive. But saving the bay is so not my issue.” Honestly, I'm not sure I would have given a dollar to join the organization, even today. I probably would have been one of those people who said, “Yeah, filling in the bay is a terrible idea. But nothing is going to change. People with lots of money own that land. They're never going to give it up.” And instead of going to a rally or protest, I would have stayed home and watched television.

Why is it some people are activists, passionate about justice? How is it that some people get out there to work for change in the world, and I can't seem to find the time or the energy to do even the things I think are a good idea? I ask myself often: What do I feel strongly enough about to actually work to make change happen? What would stir me out of my own small set of concerns—for my family, my friends, my work: what some people have called “the gated community of the heart”?

I think we are hearing some of that same internal conversation going on for Moses in the verses from Exodus that we read this morning. The Bible gives us the story with God's voice in it, but I'm guessing that God's voice sounded to Moses pretty much like it sounds to us: inside his head, clearly identifiable as God only afterward, when you put the story together. To anyone else, it would have looked like Moses talking to himself—wrestling with his inertia, his fear, maybe even his apathy.

Moses already knew what God told him. He knew his fellow Israelites were oppressed, slaves, in Egypt. This was not breaking news. Moses was out there in the desert tending sheep because he didn't *want* to be in the middle of that mess. He'd already spent a good part of his life in the middle of the Egyptian master/Hebrew slave mix, and it wasn't that pleasant. So he'd moved to the suburbs, where he could have a more peaceful life among the sheep and his own family.

“Something has to change. Go do something about this,” this voice in Moses' head said.

“I can't,” Moses said back.

And you heard all the reasons he told himself.

It will never work. Why should Pharaoh change anything now?  
You might be God, but Pharaoh doesn't believe in God.  
Where am I going to get the power? I have no power.  
How would I even know what to say? I'm a terrible debater.

But God stayed with him. “Do it,” that voice kept saying. “This is important. People are dying.”

And you know the rest of the story. This is Moses. Getting his people out of slavery in Egypt, into a place where they could be free, became his issue, the work of his life.

How does that happen? How does a cause go from being a good idea that somebody should really take care of some day, to mattering so much that I am willing to get over my fear, my self-consciousness, my never-enough-time feeling, and do something to help make change? I'm not sure I know. I'm not very good at this. But here's what I have seen in my own life.

For much of the last twenty years, I've worked in organizations that value diversity, inclusiveness, the importance of making room for people who have sometimes been excluded, especially because of race. This has always made sense to me; I appreciate and support that value. I see that it's something that God wants and intends for humanity. But it was never really

*my issue*, my passion, something I felt compelled to put much personal effort into. I didn't feel personally affected by discrimination. I didn't ask them, but the people of color I knew seemed to be doing all right. So I couldn't rouse much energy to work on change *out there*, in the rest of society.

And then I came to Campbell, to this church. Now, it's my friends who could be affected by racial profiling. Now, when I hear about black men getting pulled over for driving in the wrong neighborhood at night, or that a black man in this country has a greater chance of going to prison than of going to college, it's people I love who might be targeted. Suddenly, black lives don't just matter; they matter to me. Now I am much more inclined to notice, and to stand up against, this injustice. I am much more ready to spend my time and energy to help make things change. To talk back to all those voices in my head that whine about it being too hard, or argue that it's been this way for a long time, or scare me by pointing out that this issue is big and hard and complicated.

Maybe this is how people become activists, workers for justice. For Moses, it was the image of people *he knew* who were working harder and harder for less pay, families whose children were hungry—a picture God put in his mind and would not let him forget. Sylvia McLaughlin knew if she didn't do something, the beautiful San Francisco Bay she loved would not be there for *her children*. The people who have raised millions of dollars to find a cure for breast cancer or AIDS are people whose family members and friends have died. Parents whose children have been shot at at school are the people who are leading the campaign for gun control in this country. And the ones who join them are the people who love those families, or who cannot imagine something similar happening to their own children. Gay and lesbian and transgender people are—finally, finally—becoming welcome as full citizens and whole people not because of a well-crafted argument, but because everyone knows and loves someone who is gay.

We become activists, willing to risk something, to spend ourselves for justice, when it feels personal, when change matters to someone we know, someone we love. “Justice is what love looks like in public,” Cornel West has said.

Does it matter whether we are activists or not? Can we make a difference?

This nation was set up to be run by its citizens. *We the people*, this country's Constitution begins. Representatives who have been elected to public office are not the only ones who can make things change. People make change happen. And while that is a principle of democracy—which is a political system, not a religion—there is something very Jesus-like in this idea. When Jesus talked about bringing the Kingdom of God on earth—life for everyone, in a community bound together by compassion, justice, peace, forgiveness—he didn't go to kings, or even mayors, to deliver his message. He talked to real people, powerless people like you and me. You can do this, he said. Work together. Get clear about who you are and what's important. Open your eyes wide enough to see that there are people who are hurting, who *need* something to change so that they can live. Love them with as much energy as you use to take care of yourself.

Jesus didn't suggest that you do a careful calculation first about what is likely to change and what is not. He never offered a strategy for getting the right people into public office. He said, "Go. You do it."

"And remember," he said. "I'm with you. Always."