

MEDGAR EVERS AND DOCTOR SELAH

Galloway Methodist Church  
 First Baptist Church  
 St. Peter's Catholic Cathedral

*last demonstration led by Evers  
 before he is killed*

The Movement students thought it funny that the new injunction issued by the local courts for the City of Jackson prohibiting every kind of protest demonstration should even prohibit "kneel-ins" when this had never even been attempted. The massive injunction issued against Medgar Evers, John Salter, and others prohibited everything from even "conspiring" to commit demonstrations to the glorious legal conclusion "... or other unlawful acts and conduct customarily known as 'kneel-ins' in churches in violation of the wishes and desires of said churches."

Now that the City placed the injunction up as a shield to protect the purity of the white churches it would have looked like fear not to visit those white churches. A nonviolent movement in the Gandhian tradition could be limited by such fears. I agreed with this decision to visit the churches and was disappointed that I would not be in Jackson the next Sunday to help with the first tests. (I was scheduled to preach in New York and would leave early Saturday.) I talked over plans for the church visits with Mrs. Mercedes Wright and Medgar Evers before leaving. We decided to send a group of students to the First Baptist Church to attend the morning worship service.

The huge building complex of First Baptist was the closest thing to an official temple of white supremacy in the state. The true "Holy of Holies," the inner chamber of purity, was in the State Capital Building directly across the street. Here, in the great rotunda, were the gold framed pictures of the Vestal Virgins, the state's two recent "Miss Americas" and the reigning "Miss Hospitality." On a table in the foyer was a huge bowl of pure white magnolia blossoms and dark green leaves. Above the great staircase was the stained glass figure of Justice (as a White Woman). Beneath the center of the dome was the shrine of St. Theodore Bilbo marked by an atrocious statue we called "the bigot with outstretched hand." No Negro could ever get beyond the veil that guarded these shrines--unless he carried a mop. Since the shrines inside the Capital were off-limits, the next best place to show the hypocrisy and

vital interrelation of Mississippi Religion, Mississippi Politics, and the Mississippi Way of Life was First Baptist Church.

We knew no Negroes would be admitted to the church but thought the visit was necessary, hoping some white conscience just might be a little upset when facing the reality of closing the doors of a Christian church to Negroes. I pointed out that Governor Ross Barnett often taught an adult Sunday School class at this church and that made the church even more symbolic.

Mercedes Wright and the Tougaloo students made their final plans on Saturday night while I was away--expanding the visits to include several more churches. On Sunday morning Medgar Evers directed the demonstration. Medgar drove the car that took the students to First Baptist Church. Just as the five Negroes walked up to the church Gov. Barnett arrived and stepped out of his car. About twenty ushers (and volunteers) stretched out across the church steps forming a human blockade. The Negroes were told they were not welcome because of the racial tension at the time. (At this same time other Negroes were being turned away from Capital St. Methodist Church and from Calvary Baptist Church. Five Negroes were admitted at St. Peter's Roman Catholic Cathedral, a church that had admitted Negroes on several occasions in the past few years.)

The five Negro students turned away at First Baptist Church suddenly decided to walkdown to the nearby Galloway Memorial Methodist Church, thinking they might be admitted to the worship service. At this church, on the south side of the Capital, they were met by a smaller group of ushers who seemed confused at first. Press photographers had followed the students from First Baptist. The Methodist ushers huddled then announced that no Negroes would be admitted to the worship service. Although the church service had already started a message reached the pastor, Dr. W.B. Selah, explaining what had happened at the door of his church. The morning worship service proceeded without any disruption. At the conclusion of the service Dr.

Selah remained standing at the pulpit. He told the congregation that Negroes had been refused entrance to the church. Quietly he stated:

I know in conscience there can be no color bar in a Christian  
 church so I will ask the Bishop for another appointment.

The congregation could hardly believe what they were hearing. Their pastor since 1945 had just told them he wanted to resign from their pulpit. Then the assistant minister, Rev. Jerry Furr, came to the pulpit and spoke:

I cannot willingly serve a church that turns any people away.

This was the final Sunday for each man in the Galloway pulpit. Both men soon had to move away from Mississippi.

Only a few days earlier Dr. Selah had been preaching in Macon, Georgia. The Atlanta Journal reported on his Georgia visit, quoting from his sermon there:

"When we subvert or deny justice to any human being, we crucify the Son of God afresh. Jesus was crucified not only by the Roman soldiers and Pontius Pilate but by the bigotry of the respectable citizens, the religious people of Jerusalem who had forgotten the major element in their faith--love.

"Almost the most dangerous thing is religion without love. That is bigotry. The spirit of bigotry crucified Jesus then and now. Bigotry weakens the nation by dividing it. It sets race against race, church against church, section against section."

The Atlanta paper interviewed Dr. Selah after this sermon to get his opinions about the racial turmoil in Jackson. As he talked to the reporter he must have wondered about what stands he would have to take when he returned to his home that weekend. The Journal reported his feelings:

"In an interview Tuesday, he (Dr. Selah) spoke of racial matters and some of the things he has said about them at home in Jackson.

Back in 1961, Dr. Selah preached a sermon in which

he said that to discriminate against any man because of color or creed is wrong. "Christian love means seeking for everyone the same justice, the same rights, the same opportunities we seek for ourselves," he said.

Last January he was widely quoted when he said that there should be "no color bar in the Christian church" and that all public facilities should be desegregated, with each community working out its own plan of desegregation.

"He's gotten a lot of reaction to this, both good and bad," Dr. Selah said. But he has just been at his church in Jackson for the 19th year.

"I guess 90 per cent of the people (in his church) probably disagree with me on this," he said. "But they are sweet-spirited. Most of my men want me to state my conviction. I don't rub it in on 'em every week. They want a free pulpit. They are tolerant.

I recognize the freedom of the pew to disagree. That's the theory of the Protestant Church and the Methodist Church.

"I'd been preaching that all my life," he said. "My people don't expect me to keep quiet. I've been preaching the Christian principle of brotherhood ever since I've been there. Most agree with the principles. How to apply them--that's not so easy."

After some of his public statements this year, Dr. Selah said some folks quit coming to his church. But others who didn't belong started attending. And even

those who disagreed with him began to increase their contributions enough so that at his annual conference last week, Galloway Church paid all its quotas.

In Jackson, Dr. Selah has urged Mayor Allen Thompson to appoint a biracial committee to begin some talks there, where there were demonstrations and arrests last week. He doesn't know the outcome of his suggestion, he said, but he is sure the city wants to settle issues peacefully. "There's enough good will in Jackson that we can sit down and work out our problems peacefully," he said.

"I love my people" at Galloway, he said. "That's one thing that makes it hard. You have to stand up at times and say, by implication at least: You're wrong. That's the tragedy of it."  
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On this Sunday of the first church visits the tragedy of Mississippi was expanding. Medgar Evers had brought the Negro students to the all white churches. Almost by chance Galloway Church had been visited, a church led by a minister that Medgar Evers so admired, a minister who so admired Medgar Evers. Dr. Selah, the most outstanding Methodist minister in Mississippi for almost twenty years now joined the ranks of the obscure young men among the "twenty-eight" signers of the Methodist document protesting segregation and violence that winter who had been forced to leave their churches and the state.