

“A Witness to the Truth”

Martin Luther King Jr.’s Eulogy for PTS alum James J. Reeb

Jimmy Lee Jackson, a 26-year-old African American civil rights activist, became the first martyr of the Selma, Alabama, campaign when a gunshot took his life. At his memorial service on February 26, 1965, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference announced that a march from Selma to Montgomery would begin on March 7. As the peaceful walk began, however, marchers faced brutal attacks from law officers. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. then urgently called for concerned clergy and citizens to join the efforts.

The Reverend James J. Reeb, Princeton Seminary M.Div., Class of 1953, was one of those who responded to King’s call. Reeb was a compassionate and sensitive man with a searching soul. After leaving PTS, he had served as a Presbyterian chaplain in a hospital in Philadelphia and then as an assistant pastor for a Unitarian Universalist church in Washington, D.C., before finding his place as a Quaker working with a lower-income housing project in Boston.

His efforts in the voting rights campaign in Alabama had not even spanned one day when white assailants attacked him on a Selma sidewalk, fatally injuring him. Reeb died on March 11, 1965, and his death seemed, at least in part, to be the motivation for President Lyndon Johnson’s introduction of the Voting Rights Act to a joint session of Congress four days later. Although the President invited King to attend the event, King refused, opting instead to offer Reeb’s eulogy in Brown Chapel in Selma that day. An abridged version of King’s eulogy follows. It is an eloquent and profound tribute to Reeb. King’s words also speak to this moment in our nation’s history, when violence and justice, struggle and compassion, yet again beckon for our united attention.



James J. Reeb

Photo: PTS Archives



Plaque at the entrance to the Mackay Campus Center

Photo: Chrissie Knight

"A Witness to the Truth"

by Martin Luther King Jr.

*And if he should die,
Take his body, and cut it into
little stars.
He will make the face of heaven
so fine
That all the world will be in
love with night.*

These beautiful words from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* so eloquently describe the radiant life of James Reeb. He entered the stage of history just 38 years ago, and in the brief years that he was privileged to act on this mortal stage, he played his part exceedingly well. James Reeb was martyred in the Judeo-Christian faith that all men are brothers. His death was a result of a sensitive religious spirit. His crime was that he dared to live his faith; he placed himself alongside the disinherited black brethren of this community.

The world is aroused over the murder of James Reeb. For he symbolizes the forces of good will in our nation. He demonstrated the conscience of the nation. He was an attorney for the defense of the innocent in the court of world opinion. He was a witness to the truth that men of different races and classes might live, eat, and work together as brothers.

James Reeb could not be accused of being only concerned about justice for Negroes away from home. He and his family live in Roxbury, Massachusetts, a predominantly Negro community. [They] devoted their lives to aiding families in low-income housing areas. Again, we must ask the question: Why must good men die for doing good? "O Jerusalem, why did you murder the prophets and persecute those who come to preach your salvation?" So the Reverend James Reeb has something to say to all of us in his death.

Naturally, we are compelled to ask the question, Who killed James Reeb? The answer is simple and rather limited, when we think of the who. He was murdered by a few sick, demented, and misguided men who have the strange notion that you express dissent through murder. There is another haunting, poignant, desperate question we are forced to ask this afternoon, that I asked a few days ago as we funeralized James Jackson. It is the question, What killed James Reeb? When we move from the who

to the what, the blame is wide and the responsibility grows.



James Reeb was murdered by the indifference of every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows. He was murdered by the irrelevancy of a church that will stand amid social evil and serve as a taillight rather than a headlight, an echo rather than a voice. He was murdered by the irresponsibility of every politician who has moved down the path of demagoguery, who has fed his constituents the stale bread of hatred and the spoiled meat of racism. He was murdered by the brutality of every sheriff and law enforcement agent who practices lawlessness in the

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name of law. He was murdered by the timidity of a federal government that can spend millions of dollars a day to keep troops in South Vietnam, yet cannot protect the lives of its own citizens seeking constitutional rights. Yes, he was even murdered by the cowardice of every Negro who tacitly accepts the evil system of segregation, who stands on the sidelines in the midst of a mighty struggle for justice.

So in his death, James Reeb says something to each of us, black and white alike—says that we must substitute courage for caution, says to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered him, but about the system, the way of life, the philos-

ophy which produced the murder. His death says to us that we must work passionately, unrelentingly, to make the American dream a reality, so he did not die in vain.

God still has a way of bringing good out of evil. History has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of this fine servant of God may well serve as the redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark state. This tragic death may lead our nation to substitute aristocracy of character for aristocracy of color. James Reeb may cause the whole citizenry of Alabama to transform the negative extremes of a dark past into the positive extremes of a bright future. Indeed, this tragic event may cause the white South to come to terms with its conscience.

So in spite of the darkness of this hour, we must not despair. As preceding speakers have said so eloquently, we must not become bitter nor must we harbor the desire to retaliate with violence; we must not lose faith in our white brothers who happen to be misguided. Somehow we must still believe that the most misguided among them will learn to respect the dignity and worth of all human personalities....

One day the history of this great period of social change will be written in all of its completeness. On that bright day our nation will recognize its real heroes. They will be thousands of dedicated men and women with a noble sense of purpose that enables them to face fury and hostile mobs with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneers. They will be faceless, anonymous, relentless young people, black and white, who have temporarily left behind the towers of learning to storm the barricades of violence. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a 72-year-old Negro woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity, and with the people decided not to ride the segregated buses; who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness, "My feets is tired, but my soul is rested." They will be ministers of the gospel, priests, rabbis, and nuns, who are willing to march for freedom, to go to jail for conscience' sake. One day the South will know from these dedicated children of God courageously protesting segregation, they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream, standing up with the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby carrying our

whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. When this glorious story is written, the name of James Reeb will stand as a shining example of manhood at its best.



So I can say to you this afternoon, my friends, that in spite of the tensions and uncertainties of this period, something profoundly meaningful is taking place. Old systems of exploitation and oppression are passing away. Out of the wombs of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born. Doors of opportunity are gradually being opened. Those at the bottom of society, shirtless and barefoot people of the land, are developing a new sense of somebody-ness, carving a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of despair. "People who stand in darkness have seen a great light." Here and there an individual or group dares to love and rises to the majestic heights of moral maturity.

Therefore I am not yet discouraged about the future. Granted, the easygoing optimism of yesteryear is impossible. Granted, that those who pioneered in the struggle for peace and freedom will still face uncomfortable jail terms and painful threats of death; they will still be battered by the storms of persecution, leading them to the nagging feeling that they can no longer bear such a heavy burden; the temptation of wanting to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. Granted, that we face a world crisis, which leaves us standing so often amid the surging murmur of life's restless seas. But every crisis has both its dangers

and its opportunities, its valleys of salvation or doom in a dark, confused world. The kingdom of God may yet reign in the hearts of men.

I say, in conclusion, the greatest tribute that we can pay to James Reeb this afternoon is to continue the work he so nobly started but could not finish because his life—like the Schubert "Unfinished Symphony"—was cut off at an early age. We have the challenge and charge to continue. We must work right here in Alabama, and all over the United States, till men everywhere will respect the dignity and worth of human personalities. We must work with all our hearts to estab-

lish a society where men will be—that "out of one blood God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth." We must work with determination for that great day. "Justice will roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream." We must work right here, where "every valley shall be exalted, every mountain and hill shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places straight. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." We must work to make the Declaration of Independence real in our everyday lives.

If we will do this, we will be able—right here in Alabama, right here in the deep South, right here in the United States—to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. We will be able to speed up the day when all of God's children—as expressed so beautifully in this marvelous ecumenical service—all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands in unity and brotherhood to bring about the bright day of the brotherhood of man under the guidance of the fatherhood of God.

So we thank God for the life of James Reeb. We thank God for his goodness. We thank God that he was willing to lay down his life in order to redeem the soul of our nation. So I say—so Horatio said as he stood over the dead body of Hamlet—"Good night sweet prince: may the flight of angels take thee to thy eternal rest." ■

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Given in Love

by William O. Harris

At this tragic time it is helpful to remember the many Princeton Seminary graduates who have given their lives for the love of Jesus in fulfillment of his command to love one another. There are several plaques on the porch of the Mackay Campus Center that remind us of Princetonians who have laid down their lives in the service of the kingdom of Christ. One of these plaques contains the names of six missionary alumni and their wives: Walter Lowrie (Class of 1840) and his wife were thrown into the China Sea in 1847; John Freeman (Class of 1838) and Robert McMullin (Class of 1853) and their wives were shot in 1857 during a mutiny in India; Isidor Loewenthal (Class of 1854), a convert from Judaism, was killed in India in 1864; William E. McChesney (Class of 1869) was killed by pirates in China in 1872; and John R. Peale (Class of 1905) was killed with his wife in China during the Boxer Rebellion. Another plaque remembers Elijah Lovejoy (Class of 1834), who was killed in 1837 by a mob in Illinois for preaching and publishing a newspaper advocating the abolition of slavery. A third plaque honors James Reeb (Class of 1953), who was beaten to death in 1965 while marching with Martin Luther King Jr. for civil rights in Selma, Alabama. A plaque, currently being restored, recalls William Shedd (Class of 1892), who died of disease in 1918 in Persia while leading a company of Armenian Christians escaping persecution. He was hastily buried under rocks while his wife prayed the Lord's Prayer as the group continued its flight.

Countless others, including more than 300 Korean Presbyterian pastors in the 1950s, have suffered violent deaths and gained the Victor's Crown because of a faith taught them by Princetonians. "They being dead yet speak." Hebrews 11:4

William O. Harris is Princeton Seminary's librarian for archives and special collections.



Plaque at the entrance to the Mackay Campus Center

Photo: Beth Godfrey