

### **“Submit is a Dirty Word”**

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Yesterday I was gathered around a table of friends and one of the people was telling us about a book he read. He was talking about a book written by a psychologist who said that within two different species of animal there is that response of “fight or flight.” Do you want to attack or do you run away? He said that psychologist said that when it’s inter-species - the same species - it is very different; there are actually four responses and not two. There is “fight or flight,” but when you are talking about the same species, I won’t get the third one right, I can’t remember the exact word he used, but it was like “puffed up.” So, if you were about to face someone you would look big and strong, and try to force them down. The fourth one is to “submit.” That’s why I paid attention. So you can fight, you can leave, you can puff yourself up and try to scare them into backing down, or you can submit to them.

I realized that in Psalm 86:1-10 and 16-17, what God is asking you to do is to submit to God, so that you do not need to submit to anyone or anything else. It isn’t about fighting, or fleeing, or pretending to “puff yourself up.” It’s about “submitting” to God, which gives you the strength to face whatever adversity you have to face in your life.

I was thinking about what kind of illustration would I use to help understand what it means to “submit” to God to get the strength to not “submit” to anything else?

I heard about a woman. (Last week I was on study leave and next week I am going on vacation, so I kind of hung out this week. But last week when I was on study leave, I read a number of books. It was great. Usually I have two weeks of study leave; one week I go away somewhere. I was just outside of Louisville at a conference in March, so my second week I used as a reading week; so I finished a number of books I was on.) This one [about the woman] was called “American Prophets,” by Albert Raboteau. I think he had been a professor at Yale, and people loved his class. It was called “American Prophets.” Everybody went to that class. It was the class you took.

So, finally after a number of years, he decided to write a book on that class. There were the regulars in there. He wrote about Thomas Merton, who is one of the American prophets, [and] Martin Luther King Jr. You can’t write a book about American prophets without Dr. King. And, he had a number of others. Then, all of a sudden, at the last one was the one person I didn’t know. It was a woman named Fannie Lou Hamer. And, I’m thinking, “I have to read who in the world she is, why she is one of the top eight American prophets. Sure enough, I found out by the end of the book why she was one of the eight great American prophets.

Fannie Lou was born October 6, 1917. An African-American woman growing up in the Mississippi Delta, she was the youngest of a sharecropping family. She was born in Tomnolen, Mississippi, and moved to Ruleville, Mississippi, where she would live the rest of her life. She would join her parents, and brothers and sisters, out in the fields, pulling cotton. You went out and joined your family when you were six years old.

White children in Mississippi went to school on a regular schedule of about eight and a half months; but black children only went to school four months out of the year. The only months that they were not pulling cotton were December, January, February and March, so they only received that little bit of schooling. She, like so many of the black young people of that era, would stop going to school at the age of 12 and would go back out to the fields for the rest of their lives, as she did. The only other education Fannie Lou and her brothers and sisters, friends and family would receive would be Bible study in their church. That was how they learned to read, because if you only got to go to school four months out of the year - to the age of 12 - you could barely spell your name. It was the church and Bible study that helped you learn to read, to write and allow you to be at least somewhat literate. She received a great deal of strength from her mother. Her mother would help reinforce her self-esteem that would be weakened by the pervasive white supremacy of that environment, at that point in time, in the Mississippi Delta.

Her mother would say, "Be grateful that you are black. If God wanted you to be white, God would have made you white; so you accept who you are." She would later say with tears in her eyes that her mother one day brought her home a doll. It was a black child doll. She [Fannie] had never seen one before, and yet she had one now. As a child she became aware of the constant threat of violence in that community, but she was reassured by her mother's strength and faith, and she promised herself one day if she ever became a mother she would show that same strength and faith, and teach that to her child.

Fanny's father and mother had one opportunity for upward mobility; they had saved their money from pulling all of that cotton and they were able to have a cow. They were able to buy a mule and purchase a wagon and a cultivator. And they were making some money. They were saving it, and they might have been the first black family in that community to actually own their own home. They were well on their way. But a poor, jealous, white neighbor poured insecticide into the feed, killing the cow and the three mules, and they never got back on their feet again. She said, "White people never liked to see Negroes get a little success."

In 1944, at the age of 27, Fannie Lou married Perry (Pap) Hamer, a farmer and a tractor driver. Fannie worked as a timekeeper on the plantation, and she worked as a domestic. She was going to make a way for herself and her family, and so was her husband. But everything kind of changed one night on August 27, 1962, when Fannie, at her church, found out about civil rights and civil rights activists. They came to her church and started talking to her about black voter registration. That doesn't sound like a huge deal. I don't even think she realized what that meant; but she, along with 17 other people from her church, signed up to vote.

Hamer remembered it was a beautiful sermon that motivated her to take this chance, and on the morning of August 31 they boarded a bus to travel to the Ruleville County courthouse, because they were out in the country, and they went all of the way into town. The 18 of them registered to vote. It took an entire day. First they had to take the literacy test, because they [those coordinating the voter registration] hoped that not many of them could pass it with their 12-year-old education. But there were other questions on the test. She said the first one was, who employed you? That was so they could let them [employers of black people] know they should fire you. Where is your place of residence? That was so they

could let the Ku Klux Klan know where they lived, so you could get a cross burned in your yard at the very least.

The intentional rigmarole took all day from early morning to the time the court house closed. They all got registered. On the way home, the police pulled them over and gave them all tickets. But, they made it safely home.

When she got home, the landowner pulled her aside – angry – and said, “You either go back and withdraw that vote or get off my property.”

For 18 years she had worked for him. She sent cakes overseas when he was in World War 11. She cleaned his house and watched his children. She refused to withdraw her registration, and she and her family left that land. Her decisions were always based on Biblical imperatives and spiritual songs she had learned. She turned to her employer who she had cared for and loved and as she was leaving she told him, “I didn’t go down there for you. I went down there to register for myself.” And, that might sound selfish until you hear the spiritual song that she sang every day of her life: “I’m going down to the river of Jordan. Yes, I’m going down there, for myself. Oh, I got to stand my test in the judgment. Oh, I got to stand it for myself. There’s nobody else that can go there for me. I’ve got to stand it for myself.” She was doing a spiritual act in the act of registering to vote and she knew - like at the River Jordan - there would be recompense, and she did it anyway.

On September 10, the home where she was staying was riddled with 16 bullets, and on that same night two little black girls were shot to death. Reprisals against her family included frequent drive-by threats by night riders, early morning raids by police officers with drawn guns, the arrest of her husband on a fraudulent overdue bill, and death threats by mail.

Fannie Lou’s response was to increase her role in organizing grassroots support for the registration of all black people in the Mississippi Delta. In June of 1963, after a five day workshop and while returning home, Fannie Lou and five others were arrested and jailed in Winona, Mississippi. Each of them was beaten – humiliated – including a young 15-year-old girl. Fannie Lou said they could hear the 15-year-old being beaten in the jail, and finally heard her body hit the ground. Fannie Lou’s response was to ask God to have mercy on those people, because they didn’t know what they were doing - an amazing gift of sacrifice and humility.

Then it was Fannie’s turn. They ordered her to lay down on the bunk face down. Then they made one of the other prisoners beat her with a long leather blackjack with metal tips, until the person beating her was too exhausted to keep hitting her. They pulled up her dress and made fun of her. After they had beaten her so badly, they charged her and the others with disorderly conduct. Fannie Lou suffered permanent kidney damage and a blood clot on the nerve of her left eye.

The group was finally brought before the court. They were not given representation, and some of the men who helped beat her were the jurors - so not surprisingly they were found guilty. The FBI stepped in along with Robert Kennedy and finally got them released on bond. They received no medical treatment during the weeks they were in jail, and they would have died were it not for the FBI.

No sooner did they step out of jail - to the day that Medgar Evers was shot to death - Fannie Lou was finally taken to the hospital for medical care. A few months later, in the fall of 1963, she spoke at the Freedom Vote Rally in Greenwood, Mississippi, and told her story. It was a hush, and she concluded it with reading the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Luke. "He sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captive, and recover the sight to the blind (with her blind eye), and set at liberty to them who are bruised, to preach the acceptable day of the Lord."

She did a marvelous job of seamlessly connecting Scripture with what was happening in that moment - in that place - that was so unjust. She became a Prophet, in that moment. She continued by preaching on the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed be ye when men shall revile you and persecute you, and shall set almighty evil against you falsely for my name's sake."

All of the black folk of Mississippi could understand that passage. They may not have been able to read it, but they lived it.

The torture she experienced reinforced her commitment. When many would have submitted to the white authority and backed off, she knew that she was submitting to a higher power: God's power. She would only submit to God's and no one else, and she kept up her push. The torture she experienced reinforced that commitment - so she went and started again pushing for black registration. On March 20, 1964, she announced her candidacy to run for the office of the United States Congress, to represent the second congressional district of Mississippi, including 24 counties that make up the Mississippi Delta.

She became the first black woman in Mississippi to ever run for office. On June 2, 1964, she cast the first vote of her life - for herself. She lost, but in no way could anyone verify the vote count. It was an almost entire black county. 24 counties of entirely black people, and she still lost to a white man.

Two weeks later, she went to Washington, D.C. to testify about racial discrimination in Mississippi - the first time she had left the state. She helped bring the national spotlight to the darkness of Mississippi. Fannie Lou continued to sing and teach to those who came to Mississippi for the Freedom Summer. Remember all of those kids who came down from the north including 3 three students - Andrew Goodman, Mickey Schwerner and a black young man named James Chaney - who were murdered and buried in an earthen dam. She was the one who taught them how to proclaim God's message of inclusivity and days later they died. If you have ever seen the movie "Mississippi Burning" with Gene Hackman and Wilem Dafoe, that is them.

Fannie Lou told her story at the Democratic National Convention before many people who wanted to listen. An angry Lyndon Johnson quickly called an impromptu news conference to distract attention from "that *illiterate* woman," that he later characterized her as. His strategic ploy backfired and every news agency including the three [national] TV channels showed her speech in its entirety. She went on, like Dr. King, to speak out regarding the pacifist stance. Fannie Lou also started a Freedom Farm Cooperative, where you gave one pregnant pig to each black family in the Delta, and those pigs gave birth. They shared their pigs and huge pig farms started all over the Delta, because of Fannie Lou.

In the winter of 1975, because of her kidney and other ailments she received that night in Winona, Mississippi, her health began to fail. Early in 1977 she died. She was only 60 years old and she was absolutely penniless. But with a huge outcry, money came flowing in for her funeral. Those who spoke at that funeral were John Lewis, Stokely Carmichael, Andrew Young and others. Dr. King would have been there had he been alive. According to Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, Fanny Lou Hamer had no equal except Dr. King.

The only reason most of us have no idea who she was, is because she was a black woman. Her authenticity, her sacrifice, her unwillingness to submit to lower power helped change the Civil Rights Movement and brought hope into a hopeless, dark, situation of Mississippi and that era.

Throughout the Bible, the faithful were often unwilling to submit to earthly leaders if those leaders were wrong. They would only submit to God. And, if you don't know who to submit to, you will submit to anyone more powerful than you. But if you know that God is almighty, you know that God is the only one you can submit to. If God is poking at your conscience, speaking to your heart and your very soul, you will not submit to injustice. We will not submit to inappropriate activities in this world and we will speak only to our God.

We teach our children about strength, hope and love. When we baptized Teddy today, we were saying that we will be there to teach him how to survive, to struggle, to overcome, and to not lose faith or to submit to anyone other than our one true God. And he will learn as all of these children will in this church, that God is the only one who can provide the strength, the power, the love, and the eternal care to see us through the dark moments of life and bring us into the light. Through Jesus Christ we have our faith. Amen