2017 Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Awards

Freedom of Worship

Pastor Steve Stone

Mary, my high school sweetheart and wife of 44 years, will tell you that in my private life I am not a humble person. My mother told me more than once, “You always thought well of yourself.”

However, standing in the shadow of the legacy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in league with all those luminaries who have received one of the Freedom Awards before us, honored alongside these stellar 2017 awardees, and for the specific award of Freedom of Worship, in the company of people such as Coretta Scott King, Elie Wiesel, Desmond Tutu, Karen Armstrong and Cornel West, I confess that a strange feeling, which I think is humility, has overpowered me.

And more than once my brother in love, Bashar Shala, and I have confessed to each other that we know we do not stand shoulder to shoulder with those who have been honored by this foundation in this or in years past. We simply were good neighbors to each other, as our faith traditions inspire us to be, and caught the attention of the national and world press at a time when hatefulness, especially against people of Muslim faith, was at a fever pitch. Our award is accepted as a tribute to those who have put us forward as their vicarious representatives; those who hunger for peace, love, joy, and hope; those who yearn for communities where mutual respect and understanding and valuing the uniqueness of each human being are commonplace.

I know when I began to understand that the world was not yet what I dreamed it could be. I was about five years old, and my parents ran a small grocery store in Mayberry. Really it was Parkin, Arkansas, but “Mayberry” communicates the beauty and energy of that small town in the early 50s. I had my run of Main Street. I could take a banana to the rexall, and they would make me a banana split for free; I could go to my Uncle Beane’s barber shop and pool hall, and whoever was playing stopped to let me roll the balls around the table.
At the corner most days sat my friend Jimmy, selling a bit of produce. He was as dark in complexion as anyone I had ever seen, and his gray stubble and ever ready smile made him a mixture of Santa Clause in denim overalls and an adopted grandfather for me. We would hang out and just enjoy laughing and talking and watching the world go by.

One hot day, as I was getting a drink from the public fountain on the corner, I said, “Jimmy come over and get some of this! It is so cold and tastes so good.” He said, “Stevie, I can’t.” I said, “Sure you can. Just get up and come over here.” He said, “No, I’ve got my jug here.” I said, “Come on Jimmy, just for a taste!” He said, “I can’t”. Something about the nervous tone of his voice and how his eyes darted around made me stop asking. I didn’t know what, but I knew something was really wrong. I could tell he was hurt, and it hurt me that for some strange reason he couldn’t enjoy what I found so wonderful, and I couldn’t understand why.

It was, of course, years later when it dawned on me why he couldn’t drink from that fountain, long after Jimmy was gone. And the pain of that living memory deepened in me that heart and soul knowledge that something was really wrong. And for Jimmy’s sake and mine—for our friendship—I committed my life to disregard and to dismantle any barrier that anyone set up to divide people for any reason; I committed my life to working for and living out freedom from fear and ignorance for all who would open their hearts to love as taught by Jesus. I still don’t understand why anyone lets fear and ignorance trump almost everything decent and loving among people of different races, cultures, and faiths, and I’m still committed to the power of friendships to make the world a safer and more joyful place, where no one has to bring their own jug, but can drink freely from the fountain on any corner. Thank you.