

Reflection and Prayertime: The Power of One

Scripture: John 6:9-13

August 24, 2020

John 6:9-12 (NIV) “Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will that go among so many?” Jesus said, “Have the people sit down.” There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, “Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted.” So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

At last week's reflection I shared some information about one of our organizational co-founders, Maud Booth, one of my personal heroes, and about how she was a leader in prison reform both in influencing prisons to operate more humanely and in how she formed Volunteer Prison Leagues of inmates joining together in mutual support of one another to change their life paths. I shared how she was motivated to do this from a place of deep compassion and being able to imagine how the inmates might feel and how she used her “power of one” to make deep and lasting changes. I talked about how the majority of men who lived in her Hope Hall facilities post-prison release were so successful in avoiding a return to prison and establishing more stable lives. I spoke of the prisoners nicknaming Maud their “Little mother.”

Today I want to talk about another “power of one” story that turned into a “power of many” story. I gave a shout out to Maud also last week about her integrating into the governance documents of the newly formed Volunteers of America organization in 1896 that women were to be eligible for the same rights and privileges of men. This was 24 years before white women secured the right to vote in 1920! Just last week we celebrated the 100th anniversary of the vote for white women, even as we decried the fact that women of color would wait and actively campaign for 45 more years for the right to vote.

I'm embarrassed and flabbergasted that I did not know that it was only by one vote in the state of Tennessee that ratification moved forward, resulting in this nation-wide sea change and phenomenal moment and movement forward for democracy.

The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified 100 years ago this month, and it comprises just 39 words: *The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex. Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.*

But the fight to secure women that right to vote was decades long, and the final step toward ratification hinged on the decision of one young man in Tennessee: state Rep. Harry T. Burn.

Long after the women's suffrage movement was launched in the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848; after suffragists had marched, picketed the White House, staged hunger strikes and endured force-feedings in prison; finally, in August of 1920, their dream was in sight. After rejecting the amendment for decades, Congress passed it on June 4, 1919, and 35 states went on to ratify it. Suffragists needed just one more state for the 19th Amendment to be enshrined in the Constitution. Tennessee turned out to be their last

best hope, the state that had any possibility of ratifying. And that terrified them.

Suffragists knew that other states weren't going to budge on ratification. Opposition in the South was fierce. Opponents used racism and the fear of Black women's empowerment to stoke resistance. The racial arguments that were made were both ugly and abhorrent, arguing there would be “Negro domination of the government.”

With all this going on, women were out in force, arguing both for and against suffrage.

They were buttonholing legislators, counting votes, even standing guard at Union Station so no cowardly, or coerced, delegate could leave town before the vote. Their positions were made clear by the floral display on their lapels. When the women convinced a legislator to join their side, they would pin a rose to his jacket. Those for women's suffrage wore a yellow rose, while those against sported a red American Beauty. It was called “the war of the Roses.”

Calling it a war is not all that far-fetched. There were threats of kidnapping, fist-fights. There were even death threats, and the governor ordered state troopers to guard some of the suffrage leaders in the legislature. It got very ugly and the stakes were quite high. This was the moment which could decide whether American women are going to be allowed into their nation's democracy.

Into this heated frenzy enters Harry T Burn, who would become either the hero or the villain of this story to those at the time, depending on their allegiance. Burn is a freshman delegate to the Tennessee House of Representatives, hailing from the tiny hill town of Niota in East Tennessee. The youngest member of the state legislature at age 24, he's nicknamed "Baby Burn." On Aug. 18, 1920, Burn walked onto the House floor of the Tennessee State Capitol with a red rose pinned to his jacket lapel.

The anti-suffragists are sure he is on their side. Burn has been warned that his political career is in jeopardy if he votes against them. Indeed, twice that day, he votes with the antis to table the suffrage amendment — that is, to kill it by not voting on it. But that attempt fails when those votes end in a tie, 48-48.

So now comes the moment of truth: the vote on whether to ratify the suffrage amendment itself — a roll call vote, yes or no. The pressure in Tennessee's House chamber that morning was intense.

Women have packed the gallery to watch the action. The chamber is a sea of yellow and red roses.

Harry Burn is called and he, in what was regarded to be a fairly quiet voice, said, 'Aye.'

To everyone's shock, Burn had flipped. The tie is broken. Ratification has passed.

Pandemonium erupts and the antis are furious. They thought they had this locked up! The impact is seismic. The 19th Amendment is ratified. And then all hell breaks loose. You have the suffragists screaming and crying and throwing their yellow roses down onto the legislators, and the anti-suffragists are just stunned and horrified, and they're hissing and screaming at Harry Burn.

What they didn't know is that Harry Burn had a letter in his pocket that he had received shortly before the vote, from his mother, Febb Burn, back home in Niota. Febb Burn was a widow, running the family farm. She was college educated, a voracious newspaper reader and a strong supporter of women's suffrage; she was keeping close tabs on the suffrage debate, and she was worried. She hadn't read anything in the papers about where Harry stood.

So her son's in Nashville fixin' to be part of this huge vote that would make the decision about women and she finally decided maybe she needed to nudge him just a little bit. So Febb took a pencil and wrote Harry a six-page letter on lined paper, "talking about weather and weddings and blah blah blah," as Febb's granddaughter put it, then Febb got down to business. "Hurrah and vote for suffrage," she

directed her son, "and don't keep them in doubt." Harry listened.

The day after the vote, Burn told his fellow delegates, "I knew that a mother's advice is always safest for a boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification." Years later, in a family oral history, he stood by his decision. "I think it was morally right," he said. "I thought it then; I still think it." After his historic vote, newspapers had a field day churning out Harry Burn limericks, like this one that ran in *The Knoxville Sentinel*:

*There is a young man from Niota
who for precedent cares no iota
he sprung a surprise
when he flopped to the 'ayes',
and enraptured the feminine voter!*

The centennial of women's suffrage is a reminder to value our voting rights. If people really — especially women — really understood how hard it was for these women to go through 72 years of struggle, of ridicule, having to basically beg for the vote from the men who controlled the legislatures, then maybe we'd be more thankful for what they have and more likely to go out and vote.

The Suffrage Coalition had planned a big suffrage centennial parade in Knoxville, but it has pushed that back until next year because of the coronavirus pandemic. The group is calling it "Centennial Plus." "You know, the suffragists waited 72 years to get the vote," one organizer said with a chuckle. "I guess we can wait one more year to celebrate the centennial!"

So whether it's one little boy feeding a multitude with a little, a fantastic ball of energy named Maud Booth changing both prisons and prisoners for the long-lasting good of all, or a legislator son heeding the wisdom of his mother and taking a huge political risk, each used their power of one. May we all recognize and utilize in its fullest and most powerful expression, each one of us, our power of one.

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