



EN ESPAÑOL

Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: The Great Need of the Hour

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The Scripture tells us that when Joshua and the Israelites arrived at the gates of Jericho, they could not enter. The walls of the city were too steep for any one person to climb; too strong to be taken down with brute force. And so they sat for days, unable to pass on through.

But God had a plan for his people. He told them to stand together and march together around the city, and on the seventh day he told them that when they heard the sound of the ram's horn, they should speak with one voice. And at the chosen hour, when the horn sounded and a chorus of voices cried out together, the mighty walls of Jericho came tumbling down.

There are many lessons to take from this passage, just as there are many lessons to take from this day, just as there are many memories that fill the space of this church. As I was thinking about which ones we need to remember at this hour, my mind went back to the very beginning of the modern Civil Rights Era.

Because before Memphis and the mountaintop; before the bridge in Selma and the march on Washington; before Birmingham and the beatings; the fire hoses and the loss of those four little girls; before there was King the icon and his magnificent dream, there was King the young preacher and a people who found themselves suffering under the yoke of oppression.

And on the eve of the bus boycotts in Montgomery, at a time when many were still doubtful about the possibilities of change, a time when those in the black community mistrusted themselves, and at times mistrusted each other, King inspired with words not of anger, but of an urgency that still speaks to us today:

"Unity is the great need of the hour" is what King said. Unity is how we shall overcome.

What Dr. King understood is that if just one person chose to walk instead of ride the bus, those walls of oppression would not be moved. But maybe if a few more walked, the foundation might start to shake. If a few more women were willing to do what Rosa Parks had done, maybe the cracks would start to show. If teenagers took freedom rides from North to South, maybe a few bricks would come loose. Maybe if white folks marched because they had come to understand that their freedom too was at stake in the impending battle, the wall would begin to sway. And if enough Americans were awakened to the injustice; if they joined together, North and South, rich and poor, Christian and Jew, then perhaps that wall would come tumbling down, and justice would flow like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Unity is the great need of the hour - the great need of this hour. Not because it sounds pleasant or because it makes us feel good, but because it's the only way we can overcome the essential deficit that exists in this country.

I'm not talking about a budget deficit. I'm not talking about a trade deficit. I'm not talking about a deficit of good ideas or new plans.

I'm talking about a moral deficit. I'm talking about an empathy deficit. I'm talking about an inability to recognize ourselves in one another; to understand that we are our brother's keeper; we are our sister's keeper; that, in the words of Dr. King, we are all tied together in a single garment of destiny.

We have an empathy deficit when we're still sending our children down corridors of shame - schools in the forgotten corners of America where the color of your skin still affects the content of your education.

We have a deficit when CEOs are making more in ten minutes than some workers make in ten months; when families lose their homes so that lenders make a profit; when mothers can't afford a doctor when their children get sick.

We have a deficit in this country when there is Scooter Libby justice for some and Jena justice for others; when our children see nooses hanging from a schoolyard tree today, in the present, in the twenty-first

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century.

We have a deficit when homeless veterans sleep on the streets of our cities; when innocents are slaughtered in the deserts of Darfur; when young Americans serve tour after tour of duty in a war that should've never been authorized and never been waged.

And we have a deficit when it takes a breach in our levees to reveal a breach in our compassion; when it takes a terrible storm to reveal the hungry that God calls on us to feed; the sick He calls on us to care for; the least of these He commands that we treat as our own.

So we have a deficit to close. We have walls - barriers to justice and equality - that must come down. And to do this, we know that unity is the great need of this hour.

Unfortunately, all too often when we talk about unity in this country, we've come to believe that it can be purchased on the cheap. We've come to believe that racial reconciliation can come easily - that it's just a matter of a few ignorant people trapped in the prejudices of the past, and that if the demagogues and those who exploit our racial divisions will simply go away, then all our problems would be solved.

All too often, we seek to ignore the profound institutional barriers that stand in the way of ensuring opportunity for all children, or decent jobs for all people, or health care for those who are sick. We long for unity, but are unwilling to pay the price.

But of course, true unity cannot be so easily won. It starts with a change in attitudes - a broadening of our minds, and a broadening of our hearts.

It's not easy to stand in somebody else's shoes. It's not easy to see past our differences. We've all encountered this in our own lives. But what makes it even more difficult is that we have a politics in this country that seeks to drive us apart - that puts up walls between us.

We are told that those who differ from us on a few things are different from us on all things; that our problems are the fault of those who don't think like us or look like us or come from where we do. The welfare queen is taking our tax money. The immigrant is taking our jobs. The believer condemns the non-believer as immoral, and the non-believer chides the believer as intolerant.

For most of this country's history, we in the African-American community have been at the receiving end of man's inhumanity to man. And all of us understand intimately the insidious role that race still sometimes plays - on the job, in the schools, in our health care system, and in our criminal justice system.

And yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that none of our hands are entirely clean. If we're honest with ourselves, we'll acknowledge that our own community has not always been true to King's vision of a beloved community.

We have scorned our gay brothers and sisters instead of embracing them. The scourge of anti-Semitism has, at times, revealed itself in our community. For too long, some of us have seen immigrants as competitors for jobs instead of companions in the fight for opportunity.

Every day, our politics fuels and exploits this kind of division across all races and regions; across gender and party. It is played out on television. It is sensationalized by the media. And last week, it even crept into the campaign for President, with charges and counter-charges that served to obscure the issues instead of illuminating the critical choices we face as a nation.

So let us say that on this day of all days, each of us carries with us the task of changing our hearts and minds. The division, the stereotypes, the scape-goating, the ease with which we blame our plight on others - all of this distracts us from the common challenges we face - war and poverty; injustice and inequality. We can no longer afford to build ourselves up by tearing someone else down. We can no longer afford to traffic in lies or fear or hate. It is the poison that we must purge from our politics; the wall that we must tear down before the hour grows too late.

Because if Dr. King could love his jailor; if he could call on the faithful who once sat where you do to forgive those who set dogs and fire hoses upon them, then surely we can look past what divides us in our time, and bind up our wounds, and erase the empathy deficit that exists in our hearts.

But if changing our hearts and minds is the first critical step, we cannot stop there. It is not enough to bemoan the plight of poor children in this country and remain unwilling to push our elected officials to provide the resources to fix our schools. It is not enough to decry the disparities of health care and yet allow the insurance companies and the drug companies to block much-needed reforms. It is not enough for us to abhor the costs of a misguided war, and yet allow ourselves to be driven by a politics of fear that sees the threat of attack as way to scare up votes instead of a call to come together around a common effort.

The Scripture tells us that we are judged not just by word, but by deed. And if we are to truly bring about the unity that is so crucial in this time, we must find it within ourselves to act on what we know; to understand that living up to this country's ideals and its possibilities will require great effort and resources; sacrifice and stamina.

And that is what is at stake in the great political debate we are having today. The changes that are needed are not just a matter of tinkering at the edges, and they will not come if politicians simply tell us what we



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want to hear. All of us will be called upon to make some sacrifice. None of us will be exempt from responsibility. We will have to fight to fix our schools, but we will also have to challenge ourselves to be better parents. We will have to confront the biases in our criminal justice system, but we will also have to acknowledge the deep-seated violence that still resides in our own communities and marshal the will to break its grip.

That is how we will bring about the change we seek. That is how Dr. King led this country through the wilderness. He did it with words - words that he spoke not just to the children of slaves, but the children of slave owners. Words that inspired not just black but also white; not just the Christian but the Jew; not just the Southerner but also the Northerner.

He led with words, but he also led with deeds. He also led by example. He led by marching and going to jail and suffering threats and being away from his family. He led by taking a stand against a war, knowing full well that it would diminish his popularity. He led by challenging our economic structures, understanding that it would cause discomfort. Dr. King understood that unity cannot be won on the cheap; that we would have to earn it through great effort and determination.

That is the unity - the hard-earned unity - that we need right now. It is that effort, and that determination, that can transform blind optimism into hope - the hope to imagine, and work for, and fight for what seemed impossible before.

The stories that give me such hope don't happen in the spotlight. They don't happen on the presidential stage. They happen in the quiet corners of our lives. They happen in the moments we least expect. Let me give you an example of one of those stories.

There is a young, twenty-three year old white woman named Ashley Baia who organizes for our campaign in Florence, South Carolina. She's been working to organize a mostly African-American community since the beginning of this campaign, and the other day she was at a roundtable discussion where everyone went around telling their story and why they were there.

And Ashley said that when she was nine years old, her mother got cancer. And because she had to miss days of work, she was let go and lost her health care. They had to file for bankruptcy, and that's when Ashley decided that she had to do something to help her mom.

She knew that food was one of their most expensive costs, and so Ashley convinced her mother that what she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else was mustard and relish sandwiches. Because that was the cheapest way to eat.

She did this for a year until her mom got better, and she told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she joined our campaign was so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too.

So Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and reasons. Many bring up a specific issue. And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he does not bring up a specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, "I am here because of Ashley."

By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children.

But it is where we begin. It is why the walls in that room began to crack and shake.

And if they can shake in that room, they can shake in Atlanta.

And if they can shake in Atlanta, they can shake in Georgia.

And if they can shake in Georgia, they can shake all across America. And if enough of our voices join together; we can bring those walls tumbling down. The walls of Jericho can finally come tumbling down. That is our hope - but only if we pray together, and work together, and march together.

Brothers and sisters, we cannot walk alone.

In the struggle for peace and justice, we cannot walk alone.

In the struggle for opportunity and equality, we cannot walk alone

In the struggle to heal this nation and repair this world, we cannot walk alone.

So I ask you to walk with me, and march with me, and join your voice with mine, and together we will sing the song that tears down the walls that divide us, and lift up an America that is truly indivisible, with liberty, and justice, for all. May God bless the memory of the great pastor of this church, and may God bless the United States of America.



