

FREEDOM FAITH

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NARRATOR: For generations in the south, black churches offered refuge to the community but stopped short of challenging the powerful forces of segregation and white supremacy. Then, everything changed. By the 1960's, the faithful would gamble life and limb for equality.

JAMES H. CONE: Here is the church going out into the world, leaving those buildings and walking the street, transforming the world.

NARRATOR: Their weapon would be Christian love. And their faith would be tested.

BERNARD LAFAYETTE: Could you love someone who slapped you? Could you love someone who punched you in the nose? Someone who gave you a black eye?

NARRATOR: But could the power of love conquer the forces of hatred?

NARRATOR: By the 1960's the faithful would gamble life and limb.

PRATHIA HALL: The last time I stood in Brown Chapel, the stench of tear gas was in the air. Blood covered the heads and the faces of those who had been beaten bloody by the clubs of Jim Clark's posse and the so-called Alabama State Safety Patrol.

NARRATOR: In the early 1960s, Prathia Hall came South, on a momentous journey of faith. Together with her sisters and brothers in the Civil Rights Movement, she fought on the front lines, a soldier in a holy war for freedom.

PRATHIA HALL: Why did so many put their lives at risk? Those Freedom Marchers of 1965 moved out in the spirit of Jesus and in the spirit and faith of their ancestors....That God had brought them to that time and that place, and that hour in history to boldly confront the bedrock forces of segregation and racial injustice. The forces of death.

NARRATOR: Prathia Hall grew up in the North, but her family's *Southern* roots were deep. Both her parents *came* from the South, where the church held a special and long-established place at the center of the black community.

NARRATOR: The Southern Black Church was the meeting place. The balm and the salve. The place where African-Americans maintained their dignity in a world that denied it.

BETTY FIKES: The church was the center of the black community for the simple reason that we had no other place to go.

ZOHORAH SIMMONS: In spite of what the world at that time was saying to me and all of us black folk in the Jim Crow South, the church was saying, " You are loved by this church. You are loved by God." And I believed it.

BERNARD LAFAYETTE: We learned at an early age that we're all God's children. Even the older retired members of the church were still children of God. So we were all equal. We're all the children.

NARRATOR: 1945. World War Two had ended. Hundreds of thousands of African-American soldiers who had fought for freedom abroad returned to racism and legal segregation at home.

NARRATOR: Prathia Hall was five years old. She recalls a ride on a train with her sisters, as they made their way from Philadelphia to their grandparents' home down south.

PRATHIA HALL: I think this was the first time that we were not accompanied by our parents. Went to the first car that we came to. Found three seats, and sat down, just as the train was beginning to move, the conductor just literally snatched us up by the collar, you know, and what are you doing here? You can't sit here. And then kind of pushed us ahead of him down, I don't know, two or three cars, until we reached this absolutely horrible car right behind the engine. There was all the engine smoke. He just pushed us into these seats. The whole trip we sat there looking out the window, hurt far less by the pushing and the shoving, than in the psyche. The train ride had lost all its excitement. There was a message in rhythm of the wheels on the tracks. The message was: you're not good enough, you're not good enough, you're not good enough.

NARRATOR: As she and her siblings grew up, Prathia Hall's parents worked hard to convey a different, more positive message.

NARRATOR: Her father, reverend Berkeley Hall, was a Baptist minister and a passionate advocate for racial justice. He came from the school of black believers led by spiritual visions. One of these visions would become a beacon for his daughter's religious journey.

PRATHIA HALL: He would say to me, in the year that you were born, the Lord took me to a high mountain, and said to me, "This is the year that marks the rising up of the colored peoples of the world." And Dad would say, "God showed me Africa rising, Asia rising, India rising." It was in that kind of ethos that I was nurtured for the Freedom Movement.

NARRATOR: When Prathia Hall turned fifteen, this vision of oppressed peoples rising up took on new meaning

NARRATOR: In December 1955, the black community of Montgomery, Alabama organized a massive boycott of the segregated city bus system. A young minister named Martin Luther King was chosen to lead. In Montgomery's black churches, Reverend King mobilized the faithful for a religious crusade against the evils of Jim Crow.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.: We are not wrong in what we are doing. If we are wrong the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. If we are wrong the Constitution of the United States is wrong. If we are wrong, God almighty is wrong.

NARRATOR: It was here that the Modern Civil Rights Movement was born: a non-violent movement anchored in the church and the activism of ordinary people.

JAMES H. CONE: The Montgomery bus boycott is a grass roots movement. You're talking about 50,000 black people staying off buses. Now what is it that empowers people to collectively defy the city government? What was that force? That force was faith. They met twice a week, at churches, in order to sing, pray, and preach about the Movement so as to renew their spirit, renew their courage to stay off of those buses. And they stayed for 381 days. My God. That was an amazing feat.

NARRATOR: Back in Philadelphia, a teenaged Prathia Hall ached to join the movement down South. She was thrilled when the supreme court ruled segregation illegal in Montgomery. The following year, she would ask her father's permission to attend an all-Black College in Alabama.

PRATHIA HALL: I had always attended predominantly white schools, and had never had an African-American history class as they were taught in black schools and I really wanted that experience. So I asked my father if I could go South, and go to Tuskegee. He thought about it, and almost said yes. And then there was a racial incident in the area, and I'm not sending you to Alabama. You're my daughter. So this race warrior, this minister with a passion for justice, who had groomed me for the Movement when it came down to seeing me in danger was not able to handle that.

NARRATOR: In 1960 as a disappointed Prathia Hall attended school at Temple University near home, college students in the South pushed the Civil Rights struggle to a new level. In Nashville, a brigade of students, many from seminary- were training for a non-violent assault on segregation in their community. Their training was based on the teachings of Jesus and the principles of Mahatma Gandhi. Their leader, reverend James Lawson, one of the movement's most influential thinkers, who had spent three years in India deepening his understanding of Gandhian techniques.

JAMES LAWSON: Many people did not know that Gandhi pinpointed his own experiment with non-violence after reading the New Testament, especially the life of Jesus, and especially the Sermon on the Mount. And when he read the section in text from the Bible, Matthew, from 5:38-48, Gandhi said, "This is it."

BERNARD LAFAYETTE: Love those who hate you; do good to those who do evil to you. I mean this is pretty tough.

JOANN CHRISTIAN MANTS: Non-violence is not something that I naturally come from, but I had to be taught that. Because my natural thing is to lash back. But I had to be taught not to fight back. And I had to be taught that there is a greater good, a greater good than fighting back. Because you subdue your enemy. Your enemy cannot fight you when you love him.

YOUNG WOMAN: What'd you come here again for, you know you cannot be served.

NARRATOR: Grounding the discipline of non-violence in religious teachings, Reverend Lawson prepared those about to put themselves in harm's way. He encouraged his young protégés to role-play, with no holds barred.

NARRATOR: One of Lawson's students, a future minister named Bernard Lafayette grew up not far from Prathia Hall in Philadelphia.

BERNARD LAFAYETTE: I know how it felt to turn the other cheek physically, because I used to belong to a gang when I was in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. And this was back in the late forties. I'd been hit. I could be hit. I can take a lick. Okay. So that has never bothered me, taking a lick. I could take a lick. But the question is: How would you feel on the inside? Could you actually love someone who spat on you? Could you love someone who slapped you? Someone who would punch you in the nose, or give you a black eye?

NARRATOR: After months of training, Lawson's students put themselves to the test, sitting in at all-white lunch counters in downtown Nashville. When white anger exploded into rage, non-violent protestors showed discipline and resolve.

NARRATOR: Non-violence proved successful as a political strategy but for many, it would be spiritually transforming as well. For Bernard Lafayette that moment came one morning as he went to make a phone call after an all-night sit-in.

BERNARD LAFAYETTE: I was beaten by 12 cab drivers, they were kicking me and that sort of thing. Whenever they knocked me to the pavement, I stood up again brushed my coat off, wiped the shoe prints off my face, and I looked at them. Over and over again, this happened. And then there was this interesting

kind of feeling that came over me. It was kind of warm feeling, you know, just below the surface of my skin. And I felt really kind of caught up in a spiritual way. And I began to look at them, and I was trying with everything on the inside of me to have a positive feeling towards them, turning the other cheek. And, as I was looking at them, that moment of truth came. They tried to get me to run, but I wouldn't run. They tried to get me to fight. I wouldn't fight. So I defied all of their expectations.

I said, "If you gentlemen are through, I'd like to finish my phone call." And I began to walk. And they parted. And I realized at that point that this non-violence really could work.

NARRATOR: A revolution was underway ----led by an activist network of black ministers, known as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. And joining the ministers was an army of students---black and white---that called itself, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, committed to taking the freedom struggle throughout the Deep South.

NARRATOR: Until now, Prathia Hall had been forced to watch the dramatic events in the South from afar. But then her father died. She was now free to face the dangers from which her father Reverend Hall, 'the race warrior with a passion for justice' had tried so hard to protect her. She joined SNCC. Her first stop: Albany, Georgia

NARRATOR: Albany, Georgia today. A community whose faith is deep-rooted. You can hear it in the songs, in the prayers.

MAN: Our father, which art in Heaven. All powerful, Lord give me a clean hand, give me a clean heart, give me a clean mind. Give me a clean determination.

NARRATOR: Albany is a community rooted in traditions that have strengthened and preserved a people throughout the years.

NARRATOR: But back in the early 1960's, the people of Albany had yet to call upon their faith to fight the system oppressing them. That is, until a young minister from SNCC named Charles Sherrod came to town to organize and shake things up. The black community he encountered was fearful that challenging the status quo would provoke white retaliation.

CHARLES SHERROD: You had good reason to be afraid for your life and for your children's life. They'd hurt a child just as easily they would hurt an adult. But, they hadn't hurt that many children. So we came up with the idea of going to the children.

JOANN CHRISTIAN MANTS: They came to the schoolyards and talked to us. And just listening to them, this is what I was looking for. And I'm thinking that the

Lord sent them particularly for me (Laughter) because of the prayer. But I'm pretty sure there were other persons praying the same prayer that something change within Albany.

JANIE RAMBEAU: So when SNCC2 students started coming to Albany and started raising questions and talking to us, it really triggered that little thing inside that you had felt all along. I always say, Albany was ready for the picking we were ripe. The trees were bending with the fruit of unrest. It was time.

NARRATOR: The first major Albany action is a sit-in at the whites-only area of the local bus station. Five young people were arrested. Later several of them are expelled from the local all-black state college.

JANIE RAMBEAU: The leaders of the Movement had called for a demonstration, and we were determined to go. And I remember, the last thing my dad told me before I left home that morning, "You be sure to go to school and get your exams." And I said, "Yes, sir." Very obedient child. And my friend Annette and I headed straight downtown on Jackson Street. And when we got there, there were a number of people already in line, and they had started singing "We shall overcome." And Annette said, "Janie, let's get in the line." "Okay, let's go." It's impossible to hear your brothers and sisters singing out of the depths of their soul, songs like "We Shall Overcome," and not get involved.

NARRATOR: The threat of white retribution was very real. Still, the Black community rallied behind its protestors.

NARRATOR: Within 2 months, 700 people were imprisoned. Never in the nation's history had so many in one city willingly gone to jail for exercising the right to protest. It was into this charged atmosphere that Prathia Hall arrived in Albany.

DR. ANDERSON: You can never appreciate the peace, the solace, the quiet appalling silence. You read about it in the Bible. But, you can't appreciate it unless you've been in jail. Been in jail for a just cause. There is such a purging of the soul that you feel as though you have been relieved of all of your sins. The burdens of the world have been taken off of you.

PRATHIA HALL: I arrived in Southwest Georgia. I think the very first night there was a mass meeting, the Albany Movement. Reports on people who had been jailed and the outcomes for various demonstrations. The mass meeting itself was just pure power.

REVEREND WELLS: Do you believe it? Is you willing to run? Raise your hand for God. The way may be dark, you better keep on running.

JANIE RAMBEAU: The central focus of the mass meetings were God the Father. Okay. Believing that all men are created equal, believing that God meant for us to be free, totally free, not just out of slavery but free, this was the zest, the zeal with which we went into the mass meetings.

PRATHIA HALL: You could hear the rhythm of the feet, and the clapping of the hands from the old prayer meeting tradition. People singing 'Amazing Grace' or 'A Charge To Keep I Have', in the lined hymn tradition.

NARRATOR: For many young SNCC workers new to the Deep South, this music came as a revelation.

CHARLES SHERROD: I had never heard the kind of tones that came from the congregation. They were minor tones. I—I can't explain to you. I guess I have to give you an example

A charge to keep I have
A God to glorify,
A never dying soul to save
And fit it for the sky.

Now see, that's—that's a—a song where everybody's singing at one point. One person's lining the song before the whole congregation comes together.

MARTHA PRESCOD NORMAN: The first time I heard somebody line hymns, I said to myself, "Oh. This is what this means." All those years I knew the words, I knew— I didn't know what it meant. And I understood at that moment how music sustained us through slavery and through segregation and—and through everything, just in those first few minutes.

NARRATOR: Young leaders like Prathia Hall would draw deeply from this well of faith. It would help them carry the Movement's mission out of the church and into the streets.

ZOHORAH SIMMONS: When we were preparing for demonstrations, we would sing and sing, and it would really raise this spirit force that would enable us -- it was like taking on an armor. And then you'd file out of the churches, you know, singing these songs, these freedom songs. And you really believed it, you know. "I ain't scared of your jails, 'cause I want my freedom. I want my freedom, now." And, you know, often, the more afraid you were, the louder you sang.

JAMES H. CONE: Here is the church going out into the world. That's what the Civil Rights Movement was. It is church people going out into the world. It is leaving those buildings, walking the street, transforming the world. That's a powerful faith. And it transformed them in the process. And black people have never been the same since.

NARRATOR: Albany's Freedom Singers are still performing. Born in the mass meetings, the original Freedom Singers traveled throughout the country singing protest songs adapted from spirituals and hymns.

NARRATOR: In the years that follow SNCC's arrival, in protest after protest, activists demonstrate their faith on the streets of Albany.

MARTHA PRESCOD NORMAN: I think from the beginning of the movement. The basic sense of victory in Albany, Georgia is that it showed the way to defeat the southern power structure. If you have people in these cities to court arrest, willing to go to jail willing to stand up to southerner terrorism. The white southerners knew they had lost. I think people miss it because they see people getting beaten and they see sit-in demonstrators getting, you know, spit on, so they see them as victims. But the reality is, they are the actors. They are determining the course of events.

NARRATOR: The Movement had established a foothold in Albany. Now SNCC ventured into the countryside for a greater challenge of faith in the freedom struggle: voter registration. In the rural South, most African-Americans lived at the mercy of a powerful white minority. Not even their churches dared challenge white control.

ZOHORAH SIMMONS: When we initially began the Movement in Laurel, Mississippi the churches were not open to us. The ministers were fearful of the Ku Klux Klan, and the White Citizens' Council, both of, of which were very active. And so there was fear of the churches being burned, bombed, and fear of people being killed. And as in many places in the Deep South, the ministers were often the go-betweens, you know, between the black community and the white community, and so there was a lot of pressure on those guys not to let us in their churches.

NARRATOR: Forty-one black churches in the South would be bombed or burned in the two years following Prathia Hall's arrival. But these SNCC leaders would not be intimidated. They fought fire with faith, and encouraged the local folks to do the same

CHARLES SHERROD: I said to them, "Do you really believe in God?" If—if you believe in God, then—then do you also believe that God said, "Thou shalt have no other god before me"? Are you not making of the white man a god, if you are afraid of this white man? And I just messed with them you know. I asked, "Why can't you vote? You're scared of the white folk. What do you believe? Do you really believe that you're going to heaven? Do you really believe that—that nothing can separate you from the love of God? Do you really believe that—that Jesus said this and Jesus said that? Do you really believe," you know, "if you

can't go and register to vote, if you can't come to the mass meeting at night?" You know. But, they had good reason to have fear

PRATHIA HALL: One day in late August of 1962, four of us were out talking to people about registering to vote. And all of a sudden we looked up, saw a great cloud of dust, a pickup truck barreling down the road. We were stopped by a man who said he was a Deputy Marshall. He got out of the car screaming at us, asking what were we doing. I answered him by looking him in the eye -- which was something that was forbidden, for black people to look white people in the eye -- and said to him we're talking to people about registration and you have no right to stop us. At which point he became just enraged. Changed colors, began literally foaming at the mouth, whipped out a gun. I remember the sound of the bullets hitting the ground around my feet. He grabbed us, marched us off to this filthy little vermin-infested hole, -- which passed for the Sasser jail. At that moment, my fear was not related to the shooting but was related to the concern that perhaps no friendly person had seen us, and that we might be held there, and then taken out in the middle of the night, and done away with.

NARRATOR: Prathia Hall lived to tell her story. Others took theirs to the grave. Facing danger, people came to mass meetings. And the brave few risked everything registering to vote.

MARTHA PRESCOD NORMAN: It seemed to me, as a young person, in the simple act of canvassing, we knew that we were basically saying to them, "Oh," you know, "probably lose your job. You probably get arrested. Oh, house might get shot into. And you could get killed." And people would say yes. So it was an amazing thing. I think that's the word. It was an amazing thing to me that anybody participated

NARRATOR: Green Grove Baptist Church in Baker County, Georgia.

JOSIE MILLER'S PRAYER: And the power and (Lord have mercy) the glory, heavenly father its another day that you spared us to be able to come out to the house of prayer one more time...

NARRATOR: It was the faithful in small prayer services like these throughout the South who stood up to segregation in the 1960's. Josie Miller's prayer: (OC) Lord help us be on one accord -- serving and praising your holy righteous name, Lord just look down on us, we need you, bless our families, bless the sick and the sturdy heavenly father, bless the ones in the hospitals.

PRATHIA HALL: The local people had the wisdom of the ages. They had lived in this system of brutal racial injustice all of their lives, and for their generations past. How had they done that? They had done that because each generation had passed on to the next generation this thing that I call freedom faith. This

sense that I'm not a nigger, I'm not gal, I'm not boy. I am God's child. And as God's child, that means that I am everything that I'm supposed to be.

It may cost my job, it may cost my life, but I want to be free, and I want my children to be free. So I'm going down to the courthouse, and I'm going to sign my name. And I'm going to trust God to take me there, and I'm going to trust God to bring me back. That's courage. That's faith. That's freedom faith.

NARRATOR: By 1964, freedom faith had inspired hundreds of thousands across America. The leaders of the Movement pointed to important victories throughout the South, on the Mall in Washington, and in the halls of Congress. But some---after confronting hatred day in and day out---began to question non-violence.

ZOHORAH SIMMONS: Being non-violent evolved for me over time. When I first got involved in the sit-in movement, before going to Mississippi, when things were lighter you know and we were marching and we were singing and being carted off to jail. it was not hard to believe in it and hold onto to it. But the almost two years that I spent in Mississippi began to wear away at me and my belief and commitment to non-violence. You know, I became much more aware of the violent nature of the system that we were up against. Um. You know, I learned to drive down there, and on at least two or three occasions, I drove at a hundred miles an hour, trying to outrun or outrunning, obviously, I am sitting here talking to you -- the Klan. But, you know, when you are a brand new driver, driving at those kinds of speeds, and not knowing if you are going to make it to town, so that they turn off and leave you alone, um, began to shake me. These things caused anger, resentment, um, in addition to the fear. Um. So, the non-violent commitment has been a struggle for me over the years.

PRATHIA HALL: Every time you pick up the paper, there's a new story of a burning or a bombing or a beating—How much of this can human beings take? Even though I fiercely wanted to be a responsible, non-violent participant in this struggle that was no easy feat.

NARRATOR: In the early months of 1965 in Selma, Alabama, the Movement's commitment to non-violence was about to be sorely tested.

JIM WEBB: We want let Mr. Wallace know that we want some voice in our government.

NARRATOR: Led by ministers and divinity students, a group of 600 gather at Brown Chapel to march to Montgomery—despite a ban issued by the governor of Alabama.

NEWS INTERVIEWER: What are you going to do if you get stopped?

HOSEA WILLIAMS: What are we going to do if we get stopped? Well, we hope we don't get stopped, but if we get stopped we're going to stand there and try to negotiate, and talk them into letting us go ahead into Montgomery.

NARRATOR: When the marchers reached the Edmund Pettus Bridge on the road out of Selma, they saw a line of State Troopers.

SYNC: You are ordered to disperse go home or go back to your church. This march will not continue.

REVEREND FREDERICK REESE: They moved in with their billy clubs clutched on both ends to literally topple those marchers over, as if you would topple bowling pins in a bowling alley. At the end of the state trooper line were men riding on horsebacks. They were pursuing, as if they were going to run over these marchers with the horses.

BETTY FIKES: All this screaming and hollering. The deputized sheriffs and police playing polo with people's skulls, and heads. My legs got so weak I had to sit. Because if I had not been looking, I couldn't have believed what I was seeing.

NARRATOR: What came to be called 'Bloody Sunday' raised a troubling question for those on the front lines. Could this non-violent spiritual Movement accomplish its goals---- or would the suffering of the people prove too great?

NARRATOR: After the marchers were beaten at the bridge, they returned to Brown Chapel. Movement leaders rush to help. One of them was Prathia Hall.

PRATHIA HALL: When I arrived at the church at Brown Chapel, it was a bloody mess. People were still screaming and crying. They were very much in shock. The smell of tear gas was in the air.

BETTY FIKES: Some people were just full of rage. Ready to do anything humanly possible to fight back.

PRATHIA HALL: I remember very vividly one man getting up, and saying while I was out there on the bridge, Jim Clark came to my house, and tear-gassed my eighty-year-old mother. So the next time he comes to my house, I'll be ready. And I don't think that there was any mystery among us as to what "I'll be ready" meant.

BETTY FIKES: As usual. What do we do? They started singing and praying. And this is when I really, I guess, began to question, you know, where's God?

PRATHIA HALL: Two of the SCLC staff persons, got up and began singing, I love Jim Clark in my heart. I love Al Lingo, the state troopers, in my heart. I love

everybody in my heart. People were not in a mood to sing. That staff person became very anxious. What he said was if you cannot sing this song and mean it -- I love Jim Clark in my heart -- then you cannot see Jesus when you die.

It had been a very, very, very traumatic day. Blood curdling screams were kind of still ringing in my ear. And I felt that what that young minister had said was heresy. That it was spiritual extortion. That we were working with people who lived their whole lives, and faced the awesome struggles, and dangers, and sufferings of their lives with the expectation that when they die, they would see Jesus. And to say to them if you cannot sing this song, then you relinquish your right to see Jesus when you die I thought was an awful declaration

REVEREND FREDERICK REESE: Looking into the eyes of those marchers, those eyes I had looked into on many occasions. I saw this question mark, the question mark of whether or not the non-violent method should be that method that should be pursued from that point on, based on what happened across that bridge.

NARRATOR: Two weeks after the carnage of Bloody Sunday, marchers once again set off from Selma for Montgomery. This time the marchers triumphantly crossed the Edmund Pettus bridge. For many this march had the feel of a religious pilgrimage. By Montgomery the protestors grew to 25,000 strong---a crowning moment for the Movement's faith-based crusade. But it also marked the end of an era. The end of a time when there was unity within the Movement about whether non-violence was the best way to confront evil---and overcome.

PRATHIA HALL PREACHING: We have been have been freed that we might set free, and there is much work to be done.

NARRATOR: In the years following Bloody Sunday activist Prathia Hall followed in her father's footsteps, becoming Reverend Prathia Hall. Now, in Selma, Alabama, in Brown Chapel once again, Reverend Hall preaches on the lessons she learned on her fateful journey South years ago.

PRATHIA HALL PREACHING: Stand firm in the freedom faith of our mothers and fathers, in the freedom faith of our elders, in the freedom which we have in Christ.

We who believe in freedom cannot rest.
We who believe in freedom cannot rest.
We who believe in freedom cannot rest.
Until it comes.

JOANN CHRISTIAN MANTS: The Movement changed the heart and soul of the community by transforming the community from one of fear, and lack of action, to

one of action. In fact, not only The Movement, but the Christian movement, turned this country right side up

ZOHORAH SIMMONS: It changed the course of my life, and it changed me internally. Um. I certainly think that it gave me a courage that I certainly didn't know I had.

CHARLES SHERROD: It's one thing to go— to be able to go into a burger place to get a hotdog or burger, to go to a library and sit down instead of standing up, go to the movies, and go inside where everybody sits instead of going up to the chicken coop. That's—that's—that's one kind of change, you know. But the real change came when black people said to themselves, "I am somebody."