Establish Justice

The character of a nation is sometimes best refined by its fieriest trials. It is revealed in the story of the struggle to establish and preserve unity, justice, liberty, and the common good. It is the story of ordinary people joining their efforts to achieve the extraordinary. It is the story of a people…We, the people….

[Insert episode title credit: establish justice]

George Washington once said that he hoped "to see America among the foremost nations of justice and liberality." Thankfully, many men and women have rose to embrace that challenge.

One such man, Richard Allen, was born into slavery in Philadelphia on February 14, 1760. His family was sold to a Delaware farmer named Stokeley Sturgis who Allen described as "what the world would call a good master." When Sturgis encountered financial troubles, he sold Allen's mother and three of his siblings, and Allen never heard from his lost family members again. "Slavery," Allen said, "is a bitter pill."

His first step to freedom came at the age of seventeen, when Allen was converted to Methodism by a traveling preacher named Freeborn Garretson. "I was awakened," said Allen, "brought to see myself poor, wretched and undone." Reverend Garretson did not stop at the conversion of the slave; he also pursued the master, preaching a sermon based on the Biblical book of Daniel that warned slave owners they would be "weighed in the balances" and "found wanting" on the Day of Judgment.

Sturgis:

My eyes were opened. For the first time, I realized that owning slaves was wrong. My neighbors thought I was crazy, letting slaves go to church. They said it would ruin them but the opposite was true. The men worked harder. Religion made the slaves better and not worse.

Financially, Sturgis could not afford to free Allen. Instead, he offered his slave an opportunity to buy his own freedom. Allen accepted his master's proposition and cut wood and did other jobs until he could finally purchase his emancipation. As a free man, Allen hauled a salt wagon from Delaware to Valley Forge during the Revolutionary War, even as he had become a licensed preacher in the Methodist Church. After the war, Allen traveled the East coast by foot, spreading the gospel to racially mixed crowds.

Allen's efforts gained the attention of Francis Asbury, the first American Methodist bishop. Asbury invited Allen to travel with him and preach to crowds in the South, but Allen wisely declined, sensing the danger in such a trip. Instead, he accepted the bishop's offer to preach at St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia.

Allen's ministry drew new converts daily to St. George's, which in turn caused concern among the white leaders of the church as the number of African Americans on the membership rolls steadily climbed. Also, there was the issue of segregation as the black congregants were forced to sit in the back of the church or stand and were excluded from the right to burial in the church cemetery. Allen tried to ease the growing tensions

by suggesting that the African Americans establish their own church, but the church elders denied his request.

During this tumultuous time, Allen, along with two preachers, other former slaves and several Quakers joined together to form the Free African Society, an organization providing aid to widows, the infirm and the unemployed. Shortly after the Society's founding, the racial tensions that had simmered for years at St. George's came to a full boil. The congregation's growth spurred a need for additional seating, so a balcony was built, with a significant portion of the project's funding and labor contributed by the church's African American members. What the contributors did not know was that this addition was to be their new segregated seating gallery. What happened next changed the course of religious history in America.

William White:

> I just couldn't believe what was happening. We were all there. We were having a prayer, we were all on our knees. And then we were interrupted. They came in, and at first approached Brother Absalom. They grabbed him by the shoulder and they said, "You have to leave." And I can still hear him saying, "Wait 'til the prayer is over." But it didn't matter. They told him, "You don't belong here."

Allen left St. George's, but remained a Methodist. In July of 1794, he gathered a group of ten black congregants and converted a blacksmith shop into a church, using the anvil as a pulpit. The result was the Bethel Church and the formation of America's first

independent black denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal or AME Church. Richard Allen, as founder, was appointed the church's first bishop.

A cause equally important to Allen was education. In 1795, he opened a school for sixty children, and in 1804 he established a society for the education of African American children. He fought tirelessly for racial equality and justice until his death in 1831, when he was remembered as "one of the great divines who has lived since the apostolic age."

Just as Richard Allen advocated the improved education of African Americans in Philadelphia, a feisty young Quaker woman blazed a trail for women of all races in the academic and professional world of her day.

The town of Geneva in upstate New York might have been a small, quaint stop on the rim of Seneca Lake, but it had a remarkable spirit. Town members of all backgrounds and faiths banded together to form the Geneva College of Medicine, a university that boasted famed educator Dr. Benjamin Hale as one of its early board members.

One day the dean of the school stood before his class to present an unusual request. Medical student Stephen Smith recounts:

> Steven Smith:
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> Dr. Lee read a letter from a doctor friend of his in Philadelphia. This friend was suggesting that we should let a woman join our school. Even worse, Dr. Lee said that the faculty was leaving the decision to us!

A meeting was called that evening to decide the woman's fate.

> Steven Smith:
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> Well, a wild scene ensued. One student exclaimed, 'Women doctors, the next thing you know they'll be men mothers!' Myself, I was partial to the idea."

Mr. Smith acted on his beliefs and made a few remarks in the woman's defense, espousing the benefits of equal education and democratic virtues. After much debate, the class decided to admit the woman, causing Elizabeth Blackwell to step into the annals of medical history.

The students were surprised to see a beautiful yet primly dressed young woman walk into the classroom and assume her seat beside the instructor's desk and began to take notes on the lecture. With each word, she was also re-writing history by setting a course for future generations of women to pursue their dreams of becoming a doctor.

Blackwell graduated as the first woman with a degree of medicine on January 23, 1849. The ceremony was held in Geneva's Presbyterian church, and upon receiving her diploma, she said to school officials, "By the help of God it shall be the effort of my life to shed honor upon your diploma."

After her graduation, she went to Paris to gain experience in a maternity hospital. There, while treating a baby with an infectious eye, liquid from the baby's eye squirted Blackwell, causing her to go blind in her left eye. Her dreams of becoming a surgeon were dashed, but her spirit remained strong. Despite this tragedy, Blackwell wrote, "I

am not sad or discouraged at what has taken place, nor is my faith in the least shaken…see how beautifully the loving Father reconciles his special protection while maintaining his universal laws. He fills me with a spirit of hope and confidence that reacts continually against the disease and will finally cure me."

Her heart's desire was to serve the poor, and so in 1857, Elizabeth, her sister and another aspiring female physician opened the New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children. The hospital was the first American training site for nurses and still is in existence today as the New York University Medical Center.

During the Civil War, Blackwell trained nurses and was recognized by President Lincoln for her efforts. The war proved a difficult time for the infirmary, which treated runaway slaves as well as white patients from the South. Some of the hospital's nurses protested, saying, "Our soldiers are fighting against these Southerners! Why should we try to heal them?" Blackwell responded, "In this hospital, we care for the sick no matter what side they represent. We are medical people and we have no right to judge our patients."

After the war, Dr. Blackwell expanded her extraordinary vision to include a medical college for women at the Infirmary. Once her legacy was firmly established, Blackwell moved to England in 1869 and lived there until her death in 1910. By that time, there were over 7,000 female doctors in the United States.

Richard Allen and Elizabeth Blackwell were outspoken agents of change in the fight to establish justice. There were many people, however, who participated in a quiet grassroots effort to help slaves escape to freedom. The result was the Underground

Railroad, a network of escape routes stretching from the banks of the Ohio River to the southern border of Canada. Blacks and whites, known as conductors, worked side by side, assisting escaped slaves to flee north, and defying the laws against aiding and abetting fugitive slaves at the risk of personal injury, arrest and death.

One of these conductors was a former slave named John Parker who purchased his freedom and moved from Mobile, Alabama to Ripley, Ohio. In addition to leading over 1,000 slaves to freedom, Parker started his own foundry and was one of the few African Americans of his day to receive a patent - three, in fact – for various mechanized inventions. Author and composer Rick Sowash tells his story:

On a moonless night about a hundred fifty years ago, John Parker rode his rowboat across the Ohio River, tied it up on the Kentucky side, and made his way along the dusty country roads of Kentucky. Past sleeping farmhouses he went until he came to a farm owned by a man named Shrofe. Old man Shrofe was a slave owner.

Parker knocked on the door of the cabin where the slaves lived. The door opened, and there was the father of a little slave family. Parker said, "Come on. Tonight's the night. I'm gonna help you escape on the Underground Railroad, across the river, north to Canada and freedom." The father made a strange noise. It sounded as if he was laughing. Parker could not see his face. It was too dark. The noise came again. Parker thought maybe the man was choking. And then he realized the man was no laughing. The man was not choking. The man was crying.

"What's wrong?" Parker said.

The man's wife came. She explained. She said, "We're not going."

"You're not going? Why not? Everything's ready."

"We're not going," she said, "without our baby."

"Well, where's your baby?"

And then she told how old man Shrofe was afraid they might run off. Every night about suppertime, he'd come to their cabin, take away their only child into the big house where he lived, put the baby on a pillow on the floor of his bedroom up on the second floor next to a lit candle and a loaded pistol. Just let them try to get that baby and escape. He knew they would never run off without their only child.

Parker had not expected this. He tried to think what to do. And then he made up his mind. He said, "When I come back, you be ready to run."

He slipped through the cornfield and passed the garden up the steps into the kitchen of the big house. He made his way up the steps, hoping the steps wouldn't creak. On the second floor, he saw candlelight coming out from beneath one of the doors. He opened the door and there he saw, just like they said, a beautiful little African American baby sound asleep on a pillow. The candle. The pistol. Parker tiptoed into the room, and then he saw the bed. Old man Shrofe laying there sound asleep, his long white beard out over the blanket.

Parker picked up the baby, pillow and all. He began backing out of the room and he was just about to the door when the baby began to fuss. You've heard those noises that babies make. "Aahhh. Aahhh." At such a moment, Parker looked, and old man Shrofe had heard the sound, too. Old man Shrofe was blinking his eyes and sitting up in bed and Parker knew he only had a few seconds.

He held the baby to his chest. He threw the pillow at the candle, knocking the candle over and making the room go dark. Out the door and down the steps he went as fast as he could, and old man Shrofe jumped up out of bed. He started yelling, "The slaves are trying to escape. The slaves are trying to escape." He found his pistol and fired it off right through the ceiling, waking up his sons. They come tumbling up out of their beds, pulling on their boots, and grabbing their pistols.

Parker was running through that cornfield, carrying the baby back to the cabin. The mother, the father, the three of them took off running down those dusty country roads, back to the river. They jumped in the boat. Parker untied the rope and began pulling on the oars and soon they were out on the Ohio again. There was the dark line of trees on the Kentucky side.

But all of a sudden – what was this? Bright orange spurts of light there among the trees, followed by the sound of the crack of pistols. It was old man Shrofe and his sons. They were firing their pistols at him. Parker said, "Get down! Get down!" The mother and father laid down flat in the middle of that boat, and Parker bravely sat there pulling on the oars. Pulling on the oars and hoping none of those bullets would hit him. Oh, they came close! He could hear the bullets whizzing past his ears, but none of the bullets hit him. He got that family out into the fog that was coming up on the Ohio and safe and sound back over to Ripley, where the Rankins and others who, like John Parker was, conductors of the Underground Railroad, helped that family to find their way north. Traveling by night, hiding by day, across Ohio to Canada where they could be free.

The Emancipation Proclamation, delivered on January 1, 1863, was an important milestone in African American history, though it took two more years for slavery to be altogether abolished by the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

Other challenges to African American rights followed. The Sixteenth Amendment gave male citizens of all races the right to vote, but it would take almost one-hundred years for that right to be fully realized in every state as ordered by the Voting Rights Act of 1965. One of the key events leading to the passage of this act occurred in Selma, Alabama. There, an eight-year-old girl named Sheyann Webb proved that even a child can make a great contribution to our national character.

Webb did not plan to become one of Martin Luther King's "littlest freedom marchers." She was on her way to school one January morning in 1965 when she saw a small group assembled at the Brown Chapel AME Church. Inside, she heard a speech by one of Dr. King's aides, who said "We are willing, and must be willing, to go to jail by the thousands in Alabama." As Webb recalled in her memoir, *Selma, Lord Selma*, "Without thinking about it in so many terms, I just became that day a part of the movement to gain our freedom. Before there could be thousands, there had to be one of us at a time."

Webb's friend, Rachel West, also joined the Selma marchers.

Rachel:

Both of us knew that joining Dr. King's army would be the most important thing we would ever do in our lives. And we did what we could, especially singing. I

remember the two of us, arm in arm, marching through the streets, singing those old freedom spirituals.

The girls joined Dr. King and the marchers as they demonstrated in Selma over the right of African Americans to vote.

And we did lots of praying. The nuns and priests at our school helped us pray for our freedom. We prayed for Dr. King, we prayed for the marchers, and we prayed for our safety. We even prayed for the white sheriff that kept putting us down.

Though the protesters were peaceful, they were subjected to cruel acts of violence including being tear gassed, beaten, herded and pushed back with cattle prods. Sheyann and Rachel realized that they might be called upon someday to make the ultimate sacrifice, to give their lives for the cause of freedom.

Rachel:

Sure, we thought about dying, but we thought a lot more about growin' up, getting married, and having kids. But then one day Sheyann asked me what happens to your soul when you die. I told her I guess it just gets up and flies away like a bird. She thought it visits all the other people that had gone on before. Then she pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket and gave it to me. On it she had written out what she wanted the newspaper when she had died.

Sheyann Webb. 8 years old. Killed today in Selma. One of Dr. King's freedom fighters who wanted all people to be happy and free. Thank God we never had to print those words.

Some of the freedom fighters were not so lucky. Both blacks and whites who joined Dr. King's growing movement were slain for the cause. Still, the great leader kept the faith and kept marching. The culmination of the demonstrator's efforts was to be a 50-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, where a signed petition outlining the unfair treatment of African Americans would be presented to Governor George Wallace. Webb and West were there that day – March 7, 1965. The 600 protesters only made it six blocks from their starting point when they were attacked at the Edmund Pettus Bridge by state and local law enforcement agents. Many of the marchers were trampled by horses and whipped and beaten as they were driven back to Selma, earning the day the name "Bloody Sunday."

Sheyann and Rachel were unharmed, but their spirits were broken. The girls joined the other protesters at the Brown Chapel Church that evening. "It was as though nobody cared to even try to win anything anymore," Webb remembered. "Like we were slaves after all and had been put in our place by a good beating."

But then someone started singing, and one by one, each person joined in until soon there was a great song rising to heaven. It was a freedom song: *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Us Around*. Sheyann and Rachel added their voices, too, and vowed to keep soldiering in Dr. King's army. Outside the church, news of the day was spreading across the country. Ministers and priests flocked to Selma to join the cause. Many

struggles ensued, including the murder of several protesters, but in the end Dr. King's marchers received an injunction that allowed them to march peacefully from Selma to Montgomery. This time, the marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge and kept going, with Webb and West among them.

Rachel (monologue):

We did it! We were so proud! We felt free, like a weight had been lifted off of our shoulders. After a few miles, Dr. King saw Shey and me and asked if we were going to walk the whole fifty miles to Montgomery. Shey told him that her feet and legs were tired, but her soul still felt like marchin'.

Today, the story of Dr. King's smallest freedom marchers is indelibly burned in the American memory as a testament to the power of courage and determination. As Sheyann once said, "We were just people, ordinary people, and we did it."

The march from Selma to Montgomery was a watershed moment in the Civil Rights movement. It might not have occurred, however, without the ruling of a judge who hailed from a family with a history of defying conventional wisdom.

Frank Johnson, Jr. was born the first of seven children and grew up in the hills of northwest Alabama. His grandfather, James Wallace Johnson, joined about five hundred other men from his native Winston County in fighting *for the Union* during the Civil War. Frank Jr. carried on his family's proud military tradition, serving under General George S. Patton. Johnson arrived at the beach at Normandy shortly after D-Day, and

during his tour of duty, he was injured twice including a bullet to the left leg and an exploding shell that embedded shrapnel into his chest.

After his service abroad, Johnson returned home and began practicing law in Jasper, Alabama in 1946. He was serving as U.S. District Attorney when President Eisenhower selected him in 1956 as a Judge for the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of Alabama. It was in this role that he had a great impact upon the Civil Rights movement.

Judge Johnson had only served the District Court a short time when three African American women were arrested for sitting in the front of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama. One of the women was Rosa Parks, who was jailed and fined fourteen dollars for the offense. The episode prompted Martin Luther King, Jr. to organize a boycott of the city's bus system. A three-judge panel was established to rule on whether the state statues violated Mrs. Parks' Constitutional rights. Judge Johnson ruled in her favor, along with Judge Richard Rives.

In 1965, it was also Judge Johnson that ruled in favor of allowing the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery. Former law school classmate and Alabama Governor George Wallace asked for a court order prohibiting the march, stating that it would only lead to more violence. The judge disagreed and issued the ruling that guaranteed the right to march to King and his followers. The Judge would later say that he was not hired to be a moral judge, or a preacher, or an evangelist. He was hired to apply the law.

Johnson's commitment to the rule of law did not always agree with the constituents of his district. Klan members frequently visited his courtroom and even burned a cross in his front yard. Johnson's mother also once received a bomb in her

carport. "If you think I'm going to cave in on something like this," the Judge said, "you better go get you something else to look for! No way. If I can't do what's right, I'll quit."

Judge Johnson was not a quitter. He overturned an Alabama law that prohibited African Americans from serving on juries. He ordered the desegregation of over 100 Alabama public schools, and he issued decisions that led to prison and mental hospital reforms.

One of the greatest testimonies to the impact of Frank Johnson's life was the respect he earned on both sides of the aisle. Calling himself a "conservative hillbilly" this former Sunday school teacher was a lifelong Republican who received appointments from Jimmy Carter and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995 from Bill Clinton. Despite many accolades, Judge Johnson remained humble about his achievements, honoring those who wrote the foundational laws of our nation. "I am not a crusader," Johnson once explained. "How can you be a crusader when you are not doing anything except taking the facts that someone else has created, and applying the law that exists?"

Daniel Webster once said that, "Justice is the greatest interest of man on earth." Men and women like Richard Allen, Elizabeth Blackwell, John Parker, Sheyann Webb and Frank Johnson, Jr. have endured personal risk and sacrifice to further the cause of justice in our history. Many more have and will follow in their footsteps, ensuring that the duty to establish justice as prescribed in the Constitution will continue for future generations.