

Civil Disobedience

August 23, 2026

With the common parental trend to over-program kids these days, I may be in the minority when I tell you that I was thrilled last week when my daughter told me she was bored. We were a couple of weeks out from the beginning of school, and she had started talking about missing school and missing her friends. Summer break had finally done its job. She had reached that magical point where she was bored enough to actually look forward to going back to school.

It reminded me of a similar experience I had in 1992. I was back home between my freshman and sophomore years in college, living in my parents' house in the tiny, microscopic town where I grew up. My boyfriend had already gone back to school, my other friends had not returned for the summer, and my mother only let me use the car to go to work. Remember, this was 1992. Most households, especially out in the boonies, did not have internet. There was no streaming. There was no social media. There was no smartphone. There was...nothing.

I. Was. Bored.

So, I started scouring my parents' bookshelves, and I came across a section that had belonged to my grandfather, who taught English literature at West High School right here in Green Bay. Along with his copies of "Hamlet" and "A Tale of Two Cities," which have since become my prized possessions because they contain his handwritten notes in the margins, was a copy of Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience."

Now, my folks were dyed-in-the-wool conservatives. Pulling that book off their shelves felt a little scandalous. Reading it felt downright subversive. Thoreau was making the argument that it is not only acceptable but sometimes morally necessary to resist unjust laws. He wrote, "It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right."

For a bored college student who had just discovered that the world was considerably more complicated than the little town in which she had grown up, this was heady stuff. It was like discovering water in the desert, and this idea that disobedience can sometimes be the highest moral good has been a central tenant of my belief system ever since. In fact, it's so much a part of who I am that when my daughter was a baby, a friend gave her a T-shirt that had a silhouette of Princess Leia from "Star Wars" on it that said, "Well-behaved women seldom defeat empires." Another friend, whose children were several years older than my daughter, saw the shirt and said, "You'd better hope she outgrows it before she learns to read."

He was joking, of course, about the particular challenges of raising children who are strong-willed and independent. But I remember thinking that there was something about that shirt that I rather hoped she would not outgrow. Because today's Scripture reading is, in many ways, a story about women who were not particularly interested in being well-behaved. Shiphrah and Puah certainly were not. Neither was Moses' mother. Neither was his sister. And, perhaps most surprisingly, neither was Pharaoh's daughter. They were women who understood that there are moments when being obedient to the powers that be means being unfaithful to something greater. Long before Thoreau wrote about civil disobedience, long before George Lucas brought us to a galaxy far, far away, these women were living it. And that is where our story begins.

The opening of Exodus is not subtle. A new king rises over Egypt, and we are told that he “did not know Joseph.” That little sentence tells us something important. Joseph and his family had once been welcomed in Egypt, had in fact been integral in building Egypt into what it was. The Israelites had lived there for generations. But now there is a new Pharaoh, a new political reality, and a new story being told about the Israelites. Pharaoh looks out at this community and says, “There are too many of them. They are too powerful. They are a threat. What if they join our enemies? What if they turn against us?”

The interesting thing is that the story tells us that Pharaoh’s assessment is simply not true. The Israelites are not actually some overwhelming military threat. Pharaoh is manufacturing a crisis. He is taking a group of people who are different from the dominant population and turning them into an enemy. (Where have I heard that story before?) You see, once they have been made into an enemy, the rest becomes easier. First comes forced labor. Then oppression. Then an order to the midwives to kill Hebrew baby boys. Finally, Pharaoh commands that every Hebrew boy be thrown into the Nile. This is all too familiar.

Human beings have a remarkably persistent tendency to define ourselves over and against someone else. We create an “us” and a “them,” and then we convince ourselves that what we are doing to “them” is necessary for the safety of “us.” History is full of examples of what happens when fear becomes a political strategy and when the people in power persuade enough others that someone else’s existence is a problem to be solved.

That is the prophetic edge of this text, and we should not shy away from it. Pharaoh is not simply an unpleasant boss. He is not having a bad day. He is using the machinery of government to oppress a vulnerable population and ultimately to attempt genocide. But what I find particularly compelling about this story is that the resistance does not come from another king. It does not come from a military general. It does not come from someone with a large following or an impressive title or substantive power.

It comes from two midwives.

Shiphrah and Puah have no positional power. They do not command an army. They do not control the government. They do not have a seat at Pharaoh’s table except when he summons them, which must have been terrifying enough. They have one thing: the conviction that what Pharaoh is asking them to do is wrong. So, they subtly, quietly, just don’t obey the law. And when Pharaoh asks why the Hebrew babies are still alive, they give him a story about how vigorous those Hebrew women are. They are apparently so vigorous that they give birth before the midwives can even get there.

I suspect if there were a few more women in the room when that story was first told, there would have been some laughter.

But there is something deeply important happening here. Shiphrah and Puah are not simply saying no. They are finding a creative way to say no that preserves life.

Then the story gives us more women who resist Pharaoh’s decree. Moses’ mother hides her son. His sister watches over him. Pharaoh’s own daughter finds him and decides to save him. Notice what happens here: the people who preserve life do not all resist in exactly the same way. The midwives openly disobey. Moses’ mother works around the system. Miriam uses her voice and

her quick thinking. Pharaoh's daughter uses the privilege and position she has within the system to protect someone the system has declared disposable. There is no single biblical model for resisting injustice. There is courage. There is creativity. There is compassion. There is strategic thinking. There is speaking up. There is quietly refusing to cooperate with evil. There is using whatever power we have to protect someone who has less.

That matters, because sometimes we hear stories like this and think, "Well, I could never be Shiprah and Puah. I could never stand up to Pharaoh." But perhaps that is not the question. The question is: Where are you standing?

Our passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans gives us another way of thinking about this. Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." That is a familiar verse, but all too often, people hear it as an invitation to personal self-improvement. Be a better person. Think positive thoughts. Become the best version of yourself. Be best.

But Paul is talking about something much bigger. He is talking about learning to see differently. He is talking about refusing to let the world's assumptions become our assumptions simply because they are the water we're swimming in. Pharaoh looked at the Israelites and saw a threat. The midwives looked at Hebrew babies and saw human beings whose lives mattered. Pharaoh saw a problem. The women saw people. Pharaoh saw power that needed to be controlled. The women saw lives that needed to be protected.

That is what transformation looks like. It is learning to see the world through the eyes of God rather than simply through the eyes of whatever system happens to have the most power.

And then Paul immediately follows that call to transformation by talking about gifts. We are not all given the same gifts. We are not all called to do the same thing. Some teach. Some serve. Some lead. Some encourage. Some give. Some show mercy. In other words, the Christian life is not a one-size-fits-all resistance movement.

Thank God for that, because some of us would be terrible at some of those jobs. Some people are built for public protest. Some are extraordinarily good at organizing. Some know how to speak truth in a room where everyone else is afraid to say it. Some can sit quietly beside someone who is hurting and make them feel less alone. Some can write the letter, make the phone call, show up at the meeting, give the money, provide the meal, teach the child, welcome the stranger, or notice the person everyone else has overlooked. The body of Christ needs all of it. Perhaps that is one of the most pastoral gifts of these two readings. They do not ask us all to be heroes. They ask us to be faithful.

I was reminded of that several years ago when the Wisconsin Conference UCC was voting to become an Open and Affirming Conference. There were a few holdouts who were staunchly opposed to it. This was before marriage equality was the law of the land, and they proposed an amendment that they apparently thought was going to be a real "gotcha." They wanted to add language saying that the Conference would "uphold the laws of the state" along with its commitment to affirm LGBTQIA+ people. The assumption seemed to be that surely good churchgoing people would agree that Christians follow the law.

When it came time for discussion, I stood up and referenced this passage from Exodus, arguing that sometimes the law and righteousness are not the same thing. Sometimes the law protects human dignity. Thank God when it does. Sometimes the law needs to be challenged because it has failed to recognize the image of God in every person. Shiphrah and Puah did not ask Pharaoh whether his order had been properly filed. They did not request clarification from the appropriate governmental agency. They did not form a committee to study the question for six months. They knew. They knew that killing babies was wrong. And they knew that their faithfulness to God mattered more than their obedience to Pharaoh.

The “we will follow the law” amendment to the Conference Open and Affirming resolution was defeated by a 99 percent majority. I remember that moment with gratitude, but I also think about what it means for us now. Because it would be very easy to hear a story like Exodus and congratulate ourselves for being on the right side of history. We can look at Pharaoh and say, “Well, obviously we aren’t Pharaoh.”

But perhaps the more difficult spiritual practice is to ask where Pharaoh might live in us. Where have I allowed fear to shape the way I see another person? Where have I accepted someone else’s definition of who is a threat? Where have I benefited from a system without asking who pays the price for it? Where have I been so concerned with following the rules that I have forgotten compassion? And where, on the other hand, might God be inviting me to use whatever power or privilege or influence I have to make life a little more possible for someone else?

Because that is the other thing I love about this story. It reminds us that we rarely know the full consequence of one faithful act. Shiphrah and Puah could not possibly have known what would happen because they refused Pharaoh. They did not know that the child whose life they helped preserve would grow up to confront Pharaoh himself. They did not know that Moses would lead an enslaved people out of Egypt. They did not know that generations later their story would still be told. They were simply doing the next faithful thing they could see.

And maybe that is all God asks of us. We do not have to know whether our actions will change the world. We just have to know whether it is the right thing to do. We do not have to know whether the letter we write will change someone’s mind. We can write it because silence would violate our conscience. We do not have to know whether welcoming one person will transform our community. We can welcome them because that is who we understand ourselves to be as people of faith. We do not have to know whether the small kindness we offer will be remembered. We can offer it because compassion is never wasted.

Friends,

Sometimes the faithful thing will be very public and very courageous.

Sometimes it will be quiet enough that no one else notices.

Sometimes it will involve standing up.

Sometimes it will involve sitting beside someone who is hurting.

Sometimes it will mean using our voice.

Sometimes it will mean using our resources.

Sometimes it will mean refusing to cooperate with something we know is wrong.

Sometimes it will mean using our place within a system to make that system more humane.

The question is not whether God has given you a role in the work of healing and liberation. Romans tells us that we are all members of one body, and each of us has a part to play. The question is what your part is.

So perhaps this week, instead of asking yourself, “What would a hero do?” ask something a little more accessible: What is the faithful thing for me to do?

Where is God asking me to see someone differently?
Where is God asking me to speak?
Where is God asking me to listen?
Where is God asking me to be courageous?
Where is God asking me to be compassionate?
Where is God asking me to use the particular gifts I have been given?

And perhaps most importantly, where am I being tempted to confuse being well-behaved with being faithful?

To be fair, sometimes being well-behaved is exactly what the world needs. We need people who keep their promises, pay their bills, show up when they say they will, return the library books, put their shopping carts back, and refrain from committing crimes before coffee.

But sometimes being well-behaved is not enough. Sometimes the Gospel calls us to be brave enough to be inconvenient. Brave enough to challenge what everyone else has accepted. Brave enough to say no when someone in authority says yes. Brave enough to let compassion disrupt our carefully ordered lives.

The Star Wars T-shirt my friend gave my daughter was meant to be funny, and it is. “Well-behaved women seldom defeat empires.” But friends, there’s actually Gospel truth hiding inside that joke. Shiphrah and Puah were not well-behaved women. Moses’ mother was not well-behaved. Miriam was not well-behaved. Even Pharaoh’s daughter was not well-behaved, at least not according to the expectations of her father or the laws of her empire. And thank God. Because the story of liberation begins with people who have the courage to discern when the rules of the empire are morally just and when breaking them is our ethical duty.

Now, don’t be afraid. The good news is that God does not require us to be Moses. God does not even require us to be Shiphrah or Puah. God simply asks us to be faithful with the place we occupy and the gifts we have been given.

Maybe you are in a position of influence this week. May you use that influence with humility and compassion. Maybe you are facing an impossible situation. May you discover the creativity and courage of the midwives. Maybe you have more power and privilege than you realize. May you use it, like Pharaoh’s daughter, to stand in solidarity with those who are being broken by the system. Maybe you feel as though what you can do is too small to matter. Remember Shiphrah and Puah. Remember that history sometimes turns on the decisions of people who never imagined they were changing history. And remember Paul’s words: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds.”

May we be transformed enough to see what God sees. May we be courageous enough to do what love requires. May we discover, perhaps in ways we cannot yet imagine, that the small acts of faithfulness we offer today are already becoming part of God's larger work of liberation.

Last, I ask that you pray for those of us who are raising strong people. Because the thing is, while it has to be hard to be a well-behaved woman if your mommy preaches the Gospel, that might just be part of how God is changing the world.

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Exodus 1:8-2:10, Romans 12:1-8
August 23, 2026