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***Frederick Douglass: A Social Justice History Lesson for Now***

February 6, 2017

Dear Social Justice Institute Community –

The venerable Frederick Douglass stated emphatically during a speech that he delivered in New York in 1857: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.”

In calling for an immediate end to the inhumane and morally bankrupt political and economic system of slavery that existed in the United States and globally, Frederick Douglass continued: “This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

Born enslaved in my home state of Maryland, Frederick Douglass, who died not quite 122 years ago this month in 1895, struggled mightily for his own literal and personal freedom – he escaped from slavery, an “illegal” act in those days (a reminder that unjust laws and government actions require that we fight against them).

In a country that exulted itself as the torchbearer of democracy while being built on a system of white supremacy, settler colonialism, and racial and economic oppression, we know (if we know the history and grapple with it honestly) that many millions of people were treated as not human or sub-human, as unworthy of equal rights, dignity, and respect.

An orator, educator, abolitionist, and activist, Frederick Douglass serves as simply one example of the many people who not only fought against slavery, but also for peace, education, and women’s suffrage in the 19th century, as well as other social and human rights in the 20th century and beyond.

So, as the name of Frederick Douglass is evoked in this contemporary moment – and rightly so (even if not with much actual knowledge of his life or struggles or death) – we ought to remember the mantra: “Power concedes nothing without a demand” and, shall we add, vigilance.

Let us draw strength from the fact that Frederick Douglass used his life, and his knowledge, and his voice to speak up, and agitate, agitate, agitate. Indeed, he dared to imagine a different world and enact it. No apologies.

No apologies.

In Struggle,

Dr. Rhonda