

SPEECH GIVEN BY JOSEPHINE BAKER  
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“My being here in St. Louis brings me back thirty five years. I never dreamed that I would return to St. Louis as an entertainer. A year ago when I decided to come to North America, I had it put in my contract that I would not appear in any city where my people could not come to see me, and at each time that there has been an approach to my coming to St. Louis I have always refused. Oh, I have had several fantastic offers in the first class theaters and night clubs, but when the question arrived about my people coming to see me, immediately there was a silence.

It was not until Mr. Woods and Attorney Grant came to Chicago to speak to me about the need of money for our schools that I decided to come...My people needed me, that was enough to make me decide.

Ladies and gentlemen believe me when I say that it makes me profoundly happy...it makes my heart swell with pride to see in this beautiful audience tonight, salt and pepper...I mean by that colored and white brothers mingling. This brings tears to my eyes and I...I want to get on my knees to thank God for letting me see this sight today. Friends and brothers, God is good...powerful...understanding. And now I have hope that St. Louis will not be the last city to join in with the other American cities that are so strongly fighting against discrimination for all Americans.

Strange, it seems just like yesterday that I ran away from home, not because I lived in poverty or that I was living in the slums for I have never been ashamed of my childhood surroundings. On the contrary, I have been very proud of my start, because it has made me remain human, and in that way understand my fellow brothers of misery. Friends, did not our Lord Jesus Christ live in poverty? Did he not? Then I believe it a great privilege to have suffered during my childhood.

I ran away from home. I ran away from St. Louis, and then I ran away from the United States of America, because of that terror of discrimination, that horrible beast which paralyzes one's very soul and body. Those in this audience that felt discrimination know what I am talking about and those who understand human beings understand what I am talking about too.

The hate directed against the colored people here in St. Louis has always given me a sad feeling because when I was a little girl I remember the horror of the East St. Louis race riot. I was very tiny but the horror of the whole thing impressed me so that here today at the age of forty five years I can still see myself standing on the west bank of the Mississippi looking over into East St. Louis and watching the glow of the burning of Negro homes lighting the sky. We children stood huddled together in bewilderment, not being able to understand the horrible madness of mob violence but here we were hiding behind the skirts of grown ups frightened to death with the screams of the Negro families running across this bridge with nothing but what they had on their backs as their worldly belongings. Friends, to me for years St. Louis represented a city of

fear...humiliation...misery and terror...A city where in the eyes of the white man a Negro should know his place and had better stay in it.

So with this vision I ran and ran and ran. I wanted to find freedom of soul and spirit. I wanted to do things to help freedom come to my people. I was ready to fight, if necessary to obtain it. I wanted to feel that I was a human being and that we were all human beings. I got on my knees asking God, in whom I profoundly believe, to show me the light...to give me the power to help my people...to put me in a position where the sunshine that I bring would serve to enlighten the whites of the existence of colored people throughout the world in which there are over 600 million. I wanted to get far away from those who believed in cruelty, so then I went to France, a land of true freedom, democracy, equality and fraternity. There my soul was at ease but after a certain time I started to wonder why it was that in St. Louis which, was at one time, a French colony that the colored people of St. Louis have no equal rights...wherein Paris we are loved and respected as human beings and both cities where the population is preponderantly white. I tried to understand why this was...I asked various people...sometimes Americans of the white race. Oh, we had interesting conversations on that subject but never were they able to give a plausible reason.

This problem became an incurable disease and between my great triumphs throughout France and Europe I could not feel satisfied. The race situation kept gnawing at my heart, paralyzing my brain...I could not stop thinking of the suffering of my people here in America. I was continually unhappy, no one could understand why I should be because at that time I was considered the greatest success in Europe but that glow in the sky of burning houses, the screams, the terror, the tears of the unfortunate children that had lost their parents - this kept coming before me on the stage, in the streets, in my sleep.

I was haunted until I finally understood that I was marked by God to try to fight for the freedom of those that were being tortured. Here tonight I am thinking of our men over there in Korea fighting, dying so that the American flag can wave in pride throughout the world.

These men want to love America which has become their country. They also want to love the white race, but, want to be respected by them. They want their wives, their mothers, children and family to be happy and at ease here in America while they are giving their blood over there. My people have a country of their own to go to if they choose...Africa...but, this America belongs to them just as much as it does to any of the white race...in some ways even more so, because they gave the sweat of their brow and their blood in slavery so that many parts of America could become prosperous and recognized in the world. I must admit they are right, this land does belong to them as much as it belongs to anyone apart from the real Americans which are the Indians, and who poor souls are having a hard time because they have no right to their country.

I believe if the white and colored people could get together and be let alone, they would understand each other and consequently love each other. There is good and bad in every race, no man in any race is perfect. But it grieves me to know that St. Louis is among

some of the cities of North America that practice discrimination...St. Louis, the city which a Negro, Mr. W. C. Handy helped to make famous throughout the world, and where a few months ago he came to do a charity benefit, only to be refused accommodations in a white hotel. Not that it is so important to be in a white hotel, but, Americans of all races should have the right to go where they please.

I remember when Lindbergh arrived in Paris, I was one of the first persons to know about his landing, because as the French people know that I was born in St. Louis, thinking I would be very proud to announce it to the public, they gave me the news first. I was then starring in the Folies Bergere. I was told to announce the great news to the public, which I did...the show stopped.

I forgot that Lindbergh was a white man and that he came from St. Louis and might not have liked Negroes. I only remembered that he was an American and that he had done something great for the progress of the world. This happened at the height of the American tourist season in Paris. There were fifty percent of Americans in the audience.

My heart almost burst with pride and joy, both the American and French people were delirious with happiness. This celebration went on all night. My joy had no bounds. I kept thinking, he is an American from St. Louis. Paris was going mad with joy.

Friends of mine invited me to one of the most fashionable restaurants in Paris at that time. The word had got around, both Lindbergh and America were on the tongues of every person...this was indeed a great victory for America. The room was packed with people and all around us champagne corks were popping. Everybody was drinking to the health of Lindbergh from St. Louis and America, when all of a sudden a clear and loud voice sounded...A white couple called the head waiter and told him not to serve me because in America this is not done...at home they said a nigger woman belongs in the kitchen.

This brought a great silence in the restaurant. I felt that if the floor could have opened and swallowed me this would be a blessing. The manager, on hearing the disturbance from the white couple came over to find out what was going on, and the white woman said: I have never sat beside a nigger in my life . . . I never will. In reply the manager reminded them that they were in France where human beings were equal and I was in my country, and if they wanted to leave he could give them their bill. He also let it be known to the other American guests present that it was a shame that the North Americans believed that their almighty dollar could rule the world.

Americans, the eyes of the world are upon you. How can you expect the world to believe in you and respect your preaching of democracy when you yourself treat your colored brothers as you do? The south will never, never be able to live down the shame of the murder of Mr. and Mrs. Moore recently in Florida.

People are dying so that you will be able to live in peace. Try to understand and love each other before it is too late. Don't let the same thing happen to America through hate and

misunderstanding that happened to Germany...Believe that it can happen...It would be a shame for good thinking members of the white race to suffer for the bad. God dislikes evil and no happiness can be built on hate. Love one another as brothers. God said that you should make this country a good and powerful one, where our forefathers came with hope. Let us stop saying white Americans and colored Americans, let us try once and for all saying...Americans. Let human beings be equal on earth as in heaven. I thank you for coming tonight...May God bless you.”

Source: UMSL Black History Project (1980 - 1983)  
Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri St. Louis  
Website: <http://www.umsl.edu/~whmc/>