Fifty years ago tomorrow I arrived here in Little Rock for the first time. I road in on a Trailways bus with four other “freedom riders.” Fifty years ago, here in Little Rock, I was arrested and put in jail because the five of us—three blacks and two whites—got off the bus together and went together into the “White” waiting room, and sat down. We were arrested on the charge of “a threatened breach of the peace.” We were quite properly arrested. We did intend to breach the peace, the so-called peace of legalized segregation. We wanted to and did challenge and break those laws that should never have been made laws in the first place.

The judge who found us guilty and put us in jail was named Quinn Glover. For me that jail sentence would become a moment of Truth, the beginning of a second education that I wasn’t supposed to get. How so—what kind of education I wasn’t supposed to get?

Rather obviously I was born white and male. Less obvious was the fact that I was born into a family of considerable class privilege. When I first became
aware of things around me in Minneapolis, Minnesota back in the late 1930s my family and I were living in a house with five fireplaces and seven bathrooms. There was a live-in maid and for the first five years of my life I would be raised by a governess. I didn’t ask for any of that but that’s what I got.

It was the total package of privilege. There were private schools and private clubs and private summer camps. There were tennis lessons and sailing lessons and horseback riding lessons. The first world I learned, my first education was a world I learned from top down, from inside privilege and power. But nobody back then told me that.

Fifty years ago this very weekend, one of my own kind—a white male of class privilege, Judge Quinn Glover—sent me to jail. For the first time in my life I found myself in a space I had never been before—outside power and regarded by power as an enemy, and power had the power to punish me for that. Without that jail I would be much less suspicious, much less critical of power than I am today. Without that jail I would have remained self-satisfied and tame—enjoying without thinking about it the privileges I got with my birth.

I came South fifty years ago riding a bus because I wanted to help black folks get some of the public freedoms I already enjoyed—not a very radical or
radicalizing reason—a kind of noblesse oblige. Instead the black community of the South saved my life, both literally and figuratively. It was an education most of us privileged white boys never got, and didn’t even know enough to miss it. Without asking for it or even wanting it, I got a second chance at life.

So, Thank you Little Rock, Thank you Judge Glover. But especially Thank you Reverend Cox and Bliss Malone and Annie Lumpkin and all the other courageous young and not so young black folks of the South who stood up for America by sitting down at the lunch counter, who went to prison and by that act saved freedom in our land, who found a way and made a way where there was no way. Thank you all those nameless ones who made history even as the forgotten ones of history.

Let me name two of those forgotten ones whose names I never learned but taught me things I needed to learn and, in one case, literally saved my life.

I came South again in 1964 to join the Mississippi Freedom Summer. The idea was to bring a thousand students from the North, mostly white, and join with SNCC workers in Mississippi to work on a voter registration drive and establish local freedom schools. I was assigned to Hattisburg, Mississippi. By then I was married and had two small children. My wife Bonnie gave me
permission to go. The majority of the white folks in Mississippi regarded us white protestors as betrayers of our own white race. There were, however, a few exceptions. One was a music professor at the local university who spoke with a thick German-American accent. One night he gathered perhaps ten local white Mississippians who were in favor of our activity. We met in his living room and because of the fear of local white retaliation the windows were covered with blankets.

I asked him: “Why are you doing this? The administration of your university is highly politicized and if they find out you could lose your job?” The man, a white man of some fifty years or so, answered simply and directly and very powerfully. He said: “Why do I do this? because I come from Aushwitz.” It was the first time I met a Survivor.

The last time I would go South as a civil rights worker, and the time I nearly got killed, was in May of 1965. A black Baptist preacher, Charles Sherrod, who had been a fellow student with me at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, was leading a voter registration drive in Newton, the county seat of Baker County in southwest Georgia. In that county the black population constituted a 2/3rds majority, but in 1965 not one black was registered to vote.
Sherrod phoned from Newton back to the seminary in New York because the black demonstrators were getting routinely beaten by the local white toughs. And the FBI and the northern news media would not come down the fifty miles from Albany, Georgia to Newton because back then white violence against blacks was not considered newsworthy. So Sherrod asked for some white guys to come and join the protest. I was one of two who did that. And sure enough, now the FBI and the northern news media showed up.

We were marching together around the county courthouse where the voter registration office was located. Just in front of me was a black woman of some forty years with two of her children marching just in front of her. A white woman half her age came up and said: “Bessie, you get out of that line or never come to work at my house again!” Bessie stayed in that line, lost her job, but a few months later she got her vote.

Here is how my life was put at risk, and how a local black farmer whose name I never learned saved my life. I had rented a car to get from Albany to Newton, and a local black protestor had an epileptic seizure and needed to be taken to the hospital up in Albany. They asked me if I would take him and I said “yes.” But I didn’t even get out of town before the cops arrested me for, so they
said, “driving on the wrong side of the street.” It was early evening and I was arrested and thrown into the local jail. Usually, the jail is in the basement of the county court house and is relatively safe. But not in Newton. Instead, the jail was an isolated, free-standing squat building out behind the court house and shrouded in darkness. There were only bars, no glass in the windows. There was a black part of the jail and a white part. I was the only one in the white part. All the local Ku Klux Klan would have to do is pour gasoline through the window and throw in a match and that would have been the end of John Raines.

But the local black community knew I was in danger and they got a local black farmer to put his farm up as collateral for my bail. The next morning I was out. I went South to help others get their freedom. And they gave me back my life, together with a second education a privileged white boy from the North wasn’t supposed to get or, as many thought back then needed to get. I got what I needed and I Thank you for that. Thank you South. Thank you black community of protest. Thank you Reverend Cox and Reverend Sherrod for being the pastors this white boy needed back then.
But that was Then; and this is Now. Back then the struggle for justice was a racial struggle. And we made some progress on that. But today, the struggle for justice is a class struggle, a struggle against the vastly expanding inequality of income and of wealth that today assaults our nation and threatens our freedom.

For working class and middle class Americans the Dream is turning into a nightmare, a nightmare of unemployment and underemployment, the nightmare of being underpaid and overworked, the nightmare of owing more to the bank than your house is worth. Wall Street may be back in the Big Bucks, but Main Street is running on empty. And most of this has been going on for 40 years now.

Here’s what’s gone wrong. Successive administrations in Washington, both Republican and Democrat, stood by while our factories closed, stood by while the working class way of life was dismantled and destroyed. Yes, they talked about new good jobs—first it was “high technology” and then “the dot-com economy” and now “the new green economy.” But those jobs weren’t that many and they didn’t pay that well. The jobs that did come were at the lower end of the service economy—clerks in Walmart or Home Depot, or aids in
hospitals or assisted living homes. Meanwhile, the top 20 percent of income earners were doing just fine, and the top 1 percent were doing even better, they were fast at work stealing America!

Here’s how that story of stealing America translates into economic statistics.

In 1976 the percentage of total U.S. income going to the wealthiest one percent was 8.9 percent. Thirty years later, in 2006, that increased to 23.5 percent. That’s nearly a three-fold increase in inequality. Why? How did that happen? This is how: in those thirty years 4/5ths of the increase in income went to that wealthiest one percent. In that thirty years between 1976 and 2006 the top wealth owners (which besides income includes real estate, mutual funds, stocks and bonds)—that richest one percent of U.S. households had come to own 33.8 percent of all the national wealth. That’s more than the combined wealth of 90 percent of American households!

And concentrated wealth translates into concentrated political clout. The Supreme Court counts money as speech and counts corporations as a person; so that wealthy persons and wealthy corporations can spend as much on elections as they want. And the result of that irrational rationalization is that Big Money
is taking away from the rest of us the meaning of our vote. Big Money is buying America and 5 out of the 9 Supreme Court Justices say that it’s legal. Is it legal to steal a country from its own people?!

That’s not the America I was taught. America is supposed to be about a promise, a promise about average folks working hard, living clean and each generation doing a little better. But that America is being lost. Yes, it’s easy to get cynical. All you have to do is have your eyes open. But only those who don’t care about freedom can afford to get cynical. Those of us who do care have to fight. Because freedom can never be freedom for the few at the expense of the many. Freedom, political freedom is built upon and preserved by equality—not absolute but that relative equality of common citizens sharing an equal voice in how things are run, and for whose benefit.

Fifty years ago we got on a bus together. We went to jail together. Some of us lost our lives. Fifty years ago struggling together we won some freedom for America. But today that freedom is threatened once again. This time the issue is not race but a new class of the wealthy few who want to rule the rest of us as if they were princes or kings.
So, it’s time to get on the bus again, the bus called “freedom.” Our destination is “a nation of the people, by the people and for the people”—that dream of a nation that still lies ahead. We The People must demand of the wealthy what they don’t want to do—and that is to join with the rest of us and fight for the future of America that belongs to all of its citizens. And that means new taxation policies. And it means new regulations on the flow of international investments. It means the wealthy must join the rest of us and begin to re-invest in “things made in America.”

Fifty years ago we got on a bus together, fifty years ago we sat down at lunch counters together, fifty years ago we marched on the streets together, we went to jail together, fifty years ago we put our dreams together—and we won some freedom for America. Well, it’s time to get on the bus together once again—the freedom bus of 2011. It’s right there, waiting for us. SO GET ON BOARD!

[end]