We are not Afraid and We Shall Overcome: The Freedom Rides and Courage

- Compelling Question
  - How can your courageous actions help to advance freedom in your life and the lives of others?

- Virtue: Courage

- Definition – Courage is the capacity to overcome fear in order to do good.

- Lesson Overview
  - In this lesson, students will consider the courage of Freedom Riders in the early days of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and how they themselves can act courageously for equality in their own lives.

- Objectives
  - Students will evaluate Freedom Riders’ courage during the integration of interstate bus travel.
  - Students will analyze how courageous acts can promote equality.
  - Students will apply their knowledge of courage to their own lives.

- Background
  - After World War II, the civil rights movement sought equal rights and integration for African Americans through a combination of federal action and local activism. One galling example of segregation (separation of the races) laws was the segregation of interstate travel on buses (where blacks were forced to sit in the back of the bus) and the terminals (where blacks and whites had separate facilities such as restrooms) that served the buses. In 1946, however, the Supreme Court stated that the segregated seating on interstate buses was unconstitutional. Some African-Americans attempted to ride the interstate buses and were arrested in North Carolina.

  In 1960, the Supreme Court followed up on its earlier decision and ordered the integration of interstate buses and terminals. In 1961, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which had been formed in 1942, appointed a new national director, James Farmer. Supported by the recent Supreme Court decision, they decided to have an interracial group ride the buses from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans to commemorate the anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education (1954) that desegregated public schools. They sent letters to President John F. Kennedy, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, the chairman of the Interstate Commerce Commission, and the president of the Greyhound Corporation announcing their intentions to make the ride and did not hear any negative reactions so they proceeded.

  During the Freedom Ride, the Kennedy Administration waffled between pressing southern state officials to protect the riders and urging civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. to call off the rides. After a mob attacked the riders in Birmingham, Alabama Governor John Patterson unsympathetically stated, “When you go somewhere looking for trouble, you usually find it.” Patterson also refused the president’s phone calls to resolve the issue, and his aides made up the excuse that he had gone fishing. When he finally spoke to the president and his Cabinet, Patterson promised to protect the riders but did not follow through on that promise. The Kennedy administration decided to send federal marshals to protect the Freedom Riders but this only antagonized southern officials who resented federal interference. Robert Kennedy stated that “the president was fed up with John Patterson...he was [also] fed up with the Freedom Riders who went down there after [the initial bombing], when it didn’t do any good to go down there.”

  Kennedy was wrong. The Freedom Riders proved that their courageous spirit and non-violent tactics won over many Americans in the North and South to their cause by exposing the brutality and racism that undergirded segregation. At this point, the civil rights movement was not dependent upon sympathetic federal officials who passed laws and used their power to advance the cause of black civil rights. Rather, they were dependent upon their characters and mutual support as they took on the system that denied them equal rights.
- **Vocabulary**
  - Integration
  - Galling
  - Segregation
  - Terminals
  - Interstate
  - Epithets
  - Congress of Racial Equality
  - Undergird
  - Perpetrated
  - Indefatigable
  - Moral courage
  - Indomitable
  - Bolstered
  - Rectitude

- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**
  - How was the Freedom Riders’ identity different from that of passengers on other buses?
  - What was the Freedom Riders’ purpose in riding into segregated areas of the country, where they knew they would face violent opposition? Why would they subject themselves to discrimination and brutal attacks just to ride a bus?
  - Why did Freedom Riders continue to venture into segregated cities after the first few rides resulted in grave injuries to those on the buses?

- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

- **Additional Resources**
Handout A: We are Not Afraid and We Shall Overcome: The Freedom Rides and Courage

Background

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Narrative

On a warm spring day, May 4, 1961, many school groups and tourists flooded Washington, D.C. to see the nation’s monuments. One bus, however, was carrying a group of thirteen black and white civil rights activists of various ages who planned to ride through the segregated states of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina before heading west to New Orleans. The executive director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), James Farmer, took his seat with the others. They tried to smile, but all of the riders knew that they would face violence perpetrated by segregationists (those who supported the separation of the races) and possibly death. Yet each one remained sitting on the bus and demonstrated a remarkable amount of courage in the quest for equality.

The riders encountered hostility, taunts, and a few scuffles in the segregated bus terminals and lunch counters in their journey through the first three states. They knew, however, that the possibility of violence would only increase the deeper into the South they went, and, with a steely resolution they prepared themselves for what would come. They pulled into Atlanta on Sunday, May 14—Mother’s Day—and made the fateful decision to split up for the next leg of the trip to Birmingham, Alabama.

The first group reached a stop in Anniston, Alabama, where an angry mob of 200 whites surrounded the Greyhound bus. Both rocks and racial epithets were hurled. As Freedom Riders were struck by projectiles, they
scrambled to get back on the bus with their hearts racing because of their great fear. The mob slashed the tires, but the bus driver fled the scene as quickly as possible. The riders checked each other’s injuries and consoled one another that the expected violence had come to pass. The driver thought they were safe as he pulled off the road several miles out of town to have the tires repaired. Another mob gathered, screaming and throwing rocks at the bus. Suddenly, one of the crowd forced his way into the back door and hurled a firebomb into the bus where it exploded into flames. The mob dispersed, and riders barely escaped with their lives.

The other group of riders pulled into their planned stop at Montgomery, Alabama. The Public Safety Commissioner, “Bull” Connor provided no officers to protect the Freedom Riders at the bus station with the excuse that it was Mother’s Day. Consequently, another large mob awaited the arrival of the riders and surrounded the bus as it pulled into the station. The fearful riders were forced off the bus and immediately assaulted. One of the riders, William Barbee, was beaten so severely that he was paralyzed for life. Rider Jim Peck was struck in the head several times and felt fortunate to escape with 50 stitches rather than a broken skull. He told a reporter that he endured the violence courageously to “show that nonviolence can prevail over violence.” All the other riders were beaten and bruised into submission.

James Farmer was frightened for his life and had a moment of weakness in which he tried to abandon the rest of the trip. As the Freedom Riders were about to pull away from Montgomery, he said goodbye to the rest of the group. One seventeen-year-old girl, Doris Castle, was even more afraid because the leader of CORE did not want to continue. She asked Farmer, “But Jim, you’re going with us, aren’t you?” with a look of disbelief. Farmer gave what he later admitted were lame, fumbling excuses about not continuing. Nearly in tears, Doris pleaded with him in a whisper, “Jim, Please.” Farmer was embarrassed and discovered a reserve of courage he did not think he had. He said to another aide, “Get my luggage and put it in the bus. I’m going.”

Nevertheless, the bus company refused to allow more of its buses to be destroyed or the lives of its drivers endangered and would not carry the Freedom Riders any further. Frustrated, they made their way to the Montgomery airport and flew to their destination of New Orleans.

One group of eight black and two white college students refused to be cowed by the violence. They were led by Diane Nash, who decided that African Americans could not allow violence to defeat the civil rights movement. She encouraged them to go to Birmingham to continue the Freedom Ride. They were arrested and summarily dumped on the side of the road more than 100 miles away in Tennessee. The indefatigable, courageous young people simply drove back to Birmingham where they attempted to board a bus, but the terrified driver declined. After that, the Kennedy administration negotiated a settlement that Alabama and Greyhound officials would accompany the new Freedom Riders to Montgomery and state police cars would protect the bus.

The bus pulled into the station, but the police cars disappeared. The Freedom Riders faced another horrendous scene. A crowd armed with bricks, pipes, baseball bats, sticks, and other weapons yelling death threats surrounded the bus. A young white man, Jim Zwerg, valiantly stepped off first and was dragged down into the mob for a beating. Two female riders were being pummeled, one by a woman swinging a purse and repeatedly hitting her head, while the other was punched in the face by a man. A federal agent who attempted to rescue the girls by putting them into his car and drive away was dragged from the car and was knocked unconscious with a pipe. The mayhem ended when a state police officer fired warning shots into the ceiling. All of the Freedom Riders needed medical attention and were rushed to a local hospital, where nearly 200 officers were needed to guard the hospital.

That night, Martin Luther King, Jr., came to Montgomery. Protected by a ring of federal marshals, Dr. King addressed a mass rally at First Baptist Church. He told the assembly, “Alabama will have to face the fact that we are determined to be free. The main thing I want to say to you is fear not, we’ve come too far to turn back … We are not afraid and we shall overcome.” Two days later, 27 Freedom Riders finally boarded buses safely and headed toward New Orleans. At the Mississippi border, however, they were all arrested and taken to jail. Several additional attempts were made but all suffered the same fate.

The Freedom Riders showed incredible courage when facing brutal violence against them as they sought to exercise their right to ride an integrated bus. Their moral courage was proven when they faced the viciousness
with non-violence and did not strike back. As the Freedom Rides were covered by the national media, their fellow Americans saw an indomitable will that was bolstered by courage rooted in moral rectitude.