

The Sound of Silence: When Even the Stones Cry Out

Luke 19:39,40,45-48

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“(Jesus) answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”

Luke 19:40 NRSV

Shhhh... Do you hear that? Listen.... Do you hear it? It's the sound of silence. (Someone should write a song about that. O wait, Simon and Garfunkel did!)

Yes, it's the sound of silence. Scientifically, is that possible? Probably, not. You know that age old question, “If a tree falls in the forest and nobody hears it, does it make a sound?” My high school science teacher taught me the answer to that question is “no”. He taught that “sound” must be “heard”, so when that tree falls it creates “sound waves”, but until the sound waves are perceived by something or “heard”, then there is no sound. So, if no one hears the tree falling then there is no sound. So scientifically, I don't think silence is a sound.

But theologically I would argue silence is a sound. Actually, silence can be deafening. Silence can testify against us. Silence can judge us. At times silence must be heard by ears of faith and acted upon by lives of faith.

Today's Scripture reading picks up at the end of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on what we usually call Palm Sunday. The followers of Jesus are quite vocal on that day shouting their “Blessed the one who comes in the name of the Lord” (Luke 19:38) and are anything but silent. Such rowdiness by Jesus' followers brings condemnation by the Jerusalem religious authorities. Basically, they tell Jesus, “Shut your followers up!”, but Jesus' response is that if his followers were silent in proclaiming the presence of God's reign in their midst, such unjust silence would cause “the stones to shout out.” (Luke 19:40)

So, what do stones sound like when they cry or shout? Well I was alive in the mid 1970's during the Pet Rock craze. You might recall a man named Gary Dahl, who put rocks into cardboard boxes and sold them. Yes, and by selling a single rock in a box he became a millionaire, and the creator of the Pet Rock. Well as a boy I had a pet rock (My parents didn't buy me one, I walked out to the street, picked up a rock and brought it into the house.) My parents loved my pet rock because it didn't require food, it didn't require trips outside, and it was quiet. Yes, quiet, with no barks or meows, just silence. So, what do rocks sound like? What noise to rocks make? They are quiet! When rocks shout, interestingly they are silent. Silent! Yet maybe their silence is their judgement against us. Could it be that silence, even the silence of the stones and rocks shouting,

is a witness against the injustice practiced by their human counterparts in God's creation. Yes, the silence of the rocks, can testify to our injustice and our inhumanity.

This summer I was struck twice within 24 hours by the sound of silence. I heard the silence. I heard the rocks. Silence! One Tuesday evening this summer, while in Jacksonville, FL, attending the Annual Conference of the International Council of Community Church, I had a phone conversation with my daughter, Sara, who was living in The Bronx, NY. She was spending a year living in the Morrisania neighborhood of The Bronx serving in the Episcopal Youth Service Corp, living in religious community with other Corp members in an old church rectory. She lived in an immigrant neighborhood, mostly people of Puerto Rican, Dominican, Jamaican, Haitian and Antiguan ancestry. Most weekends in the warm months the neighborhood is alive on Saturday nights- grills on sidewalks, music from car speakers, baseball games in the street or parks. It's a weekly celebration of life! Almost like an American tail gate party without the football game. The celebrations start in the late afternoon, maybe 3:00 or 4:00 P.M., and last into the night, maybe 2:00 or 3:00 A.M. Since the old rectory where she lives has no air conditioning, the music lingering into her bedroom window until 3:00 A.M. does little for sleep.

But the weekend before our phone conversation was a time when the Trump administration had threatened large-scale immigration raids in major cities across the country. That Saturday evening as Sara was returning home from spending the day passing out English/Spanish immigrant help sheets, telling people what to do and who to call if ICE came to their door or arrested a loved one, she passed a park usually filled with people on a late Saturday afternoon. It was about empty. A small baseball game was being played with far less people than usual, but that was all. Much quieter than usual. As she walked the sidewalks down the last few blocks to her house the sidewalks were empty. No grills. No sidewalk food. No cars blasting music. No baseball games in the street. Silence! That Saturday night no music floated into her bedroom window until 3:00 A.M. Silence! It was the silence of fear. It was the silence of injustice. I'm sure amid the silence the stones were shouting judgement against our inhumanity. Silence! During that phone call on the following Tuesday I was shocked, saddened, troubled by what I heard her describe. I could not get her story out of my mind.

Turn the clock ahead 16 hours, just 16 hours. I heard it! I heard the silence all the way in Jacksonville, FL. That next day the International Council of Community Churches (ICCC) held a prayer gathering at The Jacksonville Landing, a former shopping and restaurant venue in downtown Jacksonville. Just eleven months earlier a mass shooting took place at The Landing at a pizza restaurant, during a video football gaming competition, at which two people were killed and ten wounded. Of course, that tragedy made national news as one of the many mass shootings of 2018. The day we gathered, we gathered at Noon, the time when The Jacksonville Landing would have usually been at its busiest. The Landing sits on the riverfront of the St. John's River, on a beautiful Riverwalk. It had stores for shopping. It had restaurants for lunch as businesspeople from downtown Jacksonville would have flooded The Landing each day at Noon. It was a bustling, vibrant venue for downtown Jacksonville. A place of fun and life, until August 26, 2018. After the shootings, the crowds left, and the shops and restaurants began to close. A couple weeks before I was there the last restaurant closed. The week before my visit the city of Jacksonville purchased the property and now plans its demolition. I was there with my siblings in the ICCC at Noon that day to pray— at Noon! Noon the time of past hurriedness and vitality.

Instead – Silence. Silence! Literally in the middle of an outdoor mall in the downtown of a big city – Silence. Again, it was the silence of fear. It was the silence of injustice. I'm sure amid the silence the stones were shouting from the St. John's riverbanks judgement against our inhumanity. Silence!

After the time of prayer, I wandered around The Landing. While standing down by the river I met a security guard named Tony. After some other conversation and answering his question on why a pastor from Iowa was wandering in downtown Jacksonville, I asked about the shooting. Tony was working on that day and saw the shooter. Tony walked me up to the restaurant, Chicago Pizza, where the mass shooting occurred. Tony told me the gunman had lost a significant amount of money in the video football competition that day and was angry at the last man who beat him. He left the restaurant to return to his hotel to get a knife and a gun. Returning to the restaurant first with the knife he was met with laughter. He quickly left. Minutes later he returned with a gun and began shooting. Twelve people were shot, two fatally. As the gunman left the restaurant and was on the sidewalk outside, Tony saw him still with a gun in hand. Tony was about 50 to 60 feet away across the street. As a security guard Tony had bullets and a gun, but only police are permitted to carry loaded guns, so Tony's gun was unloaded. The gunman looked at Tony and could have shot at him, but at that moment a SWAT team appeared running down the street and the gunman quickly turned to see those SWAT members approaching. At that point the gunman took his gun and shot himself. As Tony describes this, I quickly ask, "Where did he shoot himself?" Tony's answer, "About right here. Right about where we are standing now." Something came over me. Maybe it was the silence. I thanked Tony. I wished him well. I really couldn't bear to stand there anymore. I have found myself standing on holy ground many times, but this was not one of those moments. I was beyond words. I was silent as I walked away.

Jesus was never fond of silence nor inaction. Those Christians who seem to think that Jesus was some quiet, humble religious mystic who liked to pray by himself and was out to preserve a pious, Jewish religious tradition, might want to go back and read the Bible again. Within just five verses of Jesus' comment of the stones crying out to testify to the presence of God's reign, we find Jesus in the Jerusalem Temple driving people out. He wasn't silent. He saw how the money changers were cheating the people as they exchanged Roman coin for Temple coin. Jesus did not tolerate injustice. Jesus didn't walk off to the corner of the Temple to pray for an end to the unjust practices. He stood for justice and drove people of the Temple. Yes, Jesus, the one we call Child of the Living God, literally threw people out of God's house! Yes, he did!

Jesus showed us by word and action how to live into God's reign of love and justice. Jesus was never shy, never silent:

- + Jesus called King Herod a fox.
- + Jesus told Roman governor Pilate to his face that God's reign was not of this world.
- + Jesus touched the outcast leper.
- + Jesus told stories where the rich burned in Hades and the poor enjoyed paradise.
- + Jesus taught to love and pray for our enemies.
- + Jesus ignored unjust religious traditions and plucked grain to feed people on the Sabbath.

- + Jesus condemned the rich, the filled, and the laughing to instead bless the poor, the hungry and the mourning.
- + Jesus constantly reinterpreted the Jewish Law by saying, “You have heard it said...but I say to you...”

Jesus was not silent. No stones needed to cry out when Jesus was around.

In the last two months I have not only visited the site of the Jacksonville mass shooting, but I have visited other “silent” places, some while doing ecumenical work for the ICCC in our witness to unity and reconciliation. In just the last two months I have stood at the site of the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in Memphis. I have walked the Edmund Pettus Bridge and stood at the site of Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama. I have visited Ground Zero in New York and heard the voices reading names of loved ones and seeing the wall of pictures of those lost to evil on 9/11. I have walked the hanging columns and saw the DNA-dirt filled jars of the “Lynching Memorial”, or properly named the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. I walked the Great Hall of Ellis Island where thousands of immigrants once passed, while on the same day news reports continued to tell us how today’s immigrants are being locked in cages like animals at the US southern border. I have heard the silence! The stones have shouted loud their witness to our inhumanity. The silence witnesses to our injustice was hard to “hear”. At times the silence was deafening!

The Church has many struggles in today’s world. In recent months the Church has worked tirelessly on behalf of migrants, providing food, shelter, sanctuary, legal counsel, and bandaging what the US government is wounding. The task right now is overwhelming as our Christian siblings are being arrested and charged for giving food, drink and basic medical care to migrants, and Christian clergy are under surveillance by the government for their ministry among migrants. The church is acting, we are not silent.

But the Gospel of Jesus the Christ calls us to be the constant presence and voice of Jesus in all things:

- + As drums of war beat, the Church must speak and act.
- + As creation is attacked, the Church must speak and act.
- + As the plague of guns kills American society, the Church must speak and act.
- + As the mentally ill have care taken from them, the Church must speak and act.
- + As racism is encouraged, the Church must speak and act.
- + As the rich get richer and the poor and hungry are forgotten, the Church must speak and act.
- + As LGBTQ+ persons are attacked and basic human rights denied them, the Church must speak and act.
- + As migrants are villainized, and treated as sub-human, the Church must speak and act.
- + As basic health care and its surrounding technologies are not available to every person, the Church must speak and act.

There can be no silence on these and many other parts of our human life.

Plus, the Church must examine itself, its own silence about itself and its history:

- +There can be no more silence on the Church's love of earthly power and wealth.
- +There can be no more silence on the Church's sexual abuse of its members.
- +There can be no more silence on the Church's treatment of women as second-class members of creation.
- + There can be no more silence on the Church's treatment of LGBTQ+ persons as persons not equally created in God's image.
- + There can be no more silence on the Church's treatment of people of various races and ethnic groups using the excuse of theological doctrine of white European patriarchy and privilege.

The opposite of silence is sound and celebration. Jesus came that we may have life in all its abundance and fulness (John 10:10). The meaning of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ is getting us out of the silence of our brokenness and into the sound of the fulness of God's restored life. God's salvation is that healing, that reconciliation, that process of restoration, that takes us from silence to celebration, from brokenness to wholeness.

By our work of proclaiming and living the Gospel, the sounds of silence will grow into the rowdy shouts of God's justice and a chorus of love and shalom for all God's creation!