

Do Not Keep Silent
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Luke 10:25-37, The Parable of the Good Samaritan

In 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee, the day before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered one of the most memorable speeches in American history: *I've Been to the Mountaintop*. Do you remember that part of his speech included an analysis of today's parable?

King explored what would make the priest and Levite ignore the wounded man on the side of the road. As a fellow clergyman, he posited that perhaps they were late for a church meeting, and us preachers are notoriously late. No time to stop!

Of course there was the whole issue of ritual purity. If a priest or Levite defiled themselves it would be a time-consuming affair to complete a ritual cleansing. And who among us hasn't avoided an activity to spare ourselves the agony of tedious paperwork? And who among us hasn't sent a phone call straight to voicemail, because we knew this call would take too long? And who among us hasn't looked the other way when a homeless person asked for help, because we didn't have time or money or resources to invest in someone else's problems? We have places to go and people to see.

But King finally settles on a third hypothesis. He believes these men may have been afraid. And for good reason! The Jericho Road is a steep and treacherous climb. In just a few short kilometers, the road rises from one of the flattest places on Earth to mountains similar in height to what we'd see in Boone or Blowing Rock. And danger lurks with every turn: criminals and robbers and charlatans, all of them ready to pounce on unsuspecting victims. When you're on the Jericho Road, you'd better move with purpose.

King says that the first two men asked a very real and a very valid question, "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?"

King continues: "But then the Good Samaritan came by, and he reversed the question: 'If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?'"

The parable of the Good Samaritan evokes the very essence of Jesus' ministry: the Kingdom of God – that place where we feel like everything's gonna be okay – such a kingdom will only come about when women and men demonstrate the empathy of the Samaritan who asks: "What will happen to my neighbor if I don't act?"

Perhaps it's fitting that today's lection arrives a week after we mourn the passing of Elie Weisel, a voice who opened our eyes to the horrors of hate, and the ability of love to overcome such hate. Weisel once said that "indifference is the epitome of evil."

The priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan all found themselves at a crossroads. But the Samaritan was the only one who refused to be indifferent to evil.

My friends, I submit to you, that we are also at a crossroads. And unfortunately, our parable is not some theoretical example set in ancient times. Instead, ours is a parable that plays out over and over and over again in the headlines: young black men dying in our streets. Just this week Alton Sterling and Philando Castile became the 135th and 136th African Americans to be killed by police in 2016.

And it seems to me that too many of us in this room have played the part of priest and Levite. We have discarded these headlines. We have been too busy to be emotionally-invested. Perhaps we're scared to acknowledge the pain that each tragedy brings with it. We do not want to engage the emotional devastation that each victim's family feels. That would take too much time. And it would involve too much effort.

Perhaps we do not want to engage our privilege. Because that would mean that we would have to admit some hard realities: it would mean saying that we benefit from a system of injustice that lets people with lighter skin and fatter wallets and more desirable zip codes enjoy safeties and comforts not offered to people with darker skin and skinnier wallets and less desirable zip codes. And when we admit that, it is painful. Sometimes truth is hard to hear, and harder still to bear.

Perhaps it's easier to just ignore the world around us, and stay sealed in our little bubble. Let's keep unemployment a number we track. Let's keep the crime rate a nice statistic for the boosters of our city to pitch to prospective corporations. Let's just imagine that hungry school children are fed in the summer, because why wouldn't they be? Let's just keep pretending that everyone can be Horatio Alger. Let's just keep pretending that every American experiences the world as white, male, 39, healthy, Protestant, straight, insured, employed, loved, connected, and educated with adequate finances and transportation and housing. Because isn't that the way world exists?!?

Friends, it's time for us to stop crossing to the other side of the road. It's time for us stop using the burdens of time and self-absorption and pain and privilege as excuses for inaction. It's time for us to stop asking the question: "What's gonna happen to me if I stay here?"

And it's time for us to start asking this question, "What's gonna happen to my neighbor if I don't stay here – here in God's messy world?" God's messy world – that place where all people experience hope and pain, joy and sorrow, love and loss, life and death, together. Together. Together.

If we are to be God's people, we cannot do so in a vacuum. If we are to love our neighbors we cannot do so by simply retweeting headlines, or writing blog-posts of outrage to silence the pangs of our guilt. If we are to love our neighbors, we cannot arbitrarily choose which ones they are. If we are to love our neighbors, we cannot do so only when it's convenient or safe. If we are to love our neighbors, we cannot always feel the need to win: Every once-in-a-while we must lay down our privilege, cloak ourselves in Christ's humility, and forgo the desire to own every hashtag, to control every movement, to be designated the most-righteous, and the most-deserving, and the most correct.

And finally, if we are to love our neighbors, we cannot do so in silence.

Brother Martin once wrote: "In the end, we will not remember the words of our enemies, but rather the silence of our friends."

In this parable of headlines, we must not keep silent. Our silence will not lead us to a mountaintop, but rather, it will trample us in an avalanche.

We must speak with and for our neighbors. We must pray with and for our neighbors. We must feel empathy. We must show love.

And how about this: If we really want to give voice to the hashtag *Black Lives Matter*, we can live with conviction the law that starts this parable: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.

For when we love neighbor, we love God. And when we love God, we love neighbor!

Jesus asks, "Who is your neighbor?"

The lawyer responds, "The one who showed kindness."

Friends, go and do likewise. And when you go, don't be silent. Your neighbors need to hear you!!! May it be so! Amen.