

Shouting Into the Wind

Sunday, August 16, 2020

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Matthew 15:21-28

In the waning decades of the first century of the common era, scholars surmise there was a small group of followers of Jesus who were living in Antioch in Syria. By modern metrics, Antioch was a small city. Think of it like the size of cities like Sioux Falls, Providence, Kansas City, or closer to home, Astoria, Washington Heights, or Harlem. The thing about Antioch back then was that it was a small footprint, so only about two miles long and one mile wide, the population density was *intense*.ⁱ To give you an idea, New York currently has a density of 37 people per square acre, Antioch had a density of 117 people per square acre. Before we all get the willies thinking about that density in these COVID-19 times, let me share that Antioch is where many biblical scholars feel the community of the gospel of Matthew grew. Because this urban area was the capital of Syria, it drew people working in a range of different trades. It is suggested that everyone from sailors to carpenters, fresco-painters to bag-makers, tailors to dancers, cobblers to comedians lived in this thriving city *and* likely made up the group of followers of Jesus.ⁱⁱ

When we think about the gospel audiences of the first century, we often imagine them the size of our churches and then we conflate that with the abundance of Christians and churches we know. Some scholars suggest that whatever number that gives us in our mind, it is probably too large. Even 1000 followers of Jesus among Antioch's population of 175,000 is too large. Think more like 150. And if you can imagine it, how about 19? That's about the size of our average Wednesday midday Bible Study group. It is possible, that rather than this gospel being a tool to encourage more and more followers of Jesus, it was a tool for that small group to be encouraged, to think about how to organize themselves, to stay connected in a big city, to have some guidance about how to resolve conflicts. And in a city that size, with so many people living on top of each other, believe you me, there were conflicts in abundance.

This perspective gives us a different window through which to look at this gospel story. We can imagine a people a little more like us, hearing this story and thinking about it possibly with very similar concerns. As we rub the smudges off the glass and peer through the edge of the window frame, we see a story about Jesus in Syria, interacting with a woman from that region. Antioch is farther north than Tyre and Sidon, which are both coastal cities closer to Jerusalem. Jesus is in the region around those cities, but not necessarily in either of them when he encounters this Canaanite woman. Identifying her as Canaanite puts her in an even different class than naming her as Syrian. As a Canaanite, she is identified as one even further on the margins, as one commentator suggests, "she belongs to a people dispossessed by Israel's occupation and possession of the land."ⁱⁱⁱ

Over the years when I have taught this story, I have noticed that it is an unnerving story to people. Jesus does not come off in the best light in this narrative. He seems narrow in this thinking at first, which is not what we expect of him. The woman is corrective of his initial response, which also challenges us to see the human fallibility of Jesus. All in all, for us as

readers, it is uncomfortable. When we read this story today, there is yet another nuance to it. It is hard not to be a little disturbed by Jesus' initial silence with this woman. "Come on, Jesus!" We want to urge, "say something." Give us a witness to how to speak up and support this woman on the margins.

I don't know that I would assert silence has ever been a simple thing, but I do know silence is a complex thing today. As a spiritual people, we value silence. Silence is a way that we connect with God. We mark silence in our liturgy – some think too much, others think not enough – but we still hold silence. Silence can be prayer. Silence, like with Elijah on Mt. Horeb, can signal awareness of God's presence with us. Silence has a spiritual meaning and implications.

We are very aware that this meaning of silence is not the only meaning we must wrestle with today. In the Black Lives Matter movement and the antiracism we strive to embrace in our discipleship, we also know that "white silence = violence." This phrase is not just a protest sign or a meme. It is a way of reminding ourselves that silence in some instances has a very real impact and hurt. For the white people among us, we also know that we are called both to speak up against racism and called to be silent and let our siblings who are Black, Indigenous and People of Color speak.

The harm of silence is not a new idea. Many of you are probably familiar with the now-iconic pink triangle on a black background with the words "Silence=Death" that was the logo for the Silence=Death Project that was founded in 1987 to support people impacted by the AIDS crisis.^{iv} Martin Luther King, Jr. is often quoted as saying, "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." There are numerous similar sentiments about the holocaust of the Jewish people in twentieth-century Germany. Silence wears the cloak of violence as easily as it wears the cloak of spiritual presence.

How then do we know which time is which? How do we know when to speak and when to leave the space of silence so others may speak or that God might enter? How is our spiritual relationship with silence changing in these times? I've struggled with some of these contradictions again in my own spiritual life over these past months. It feels as if we have an opportunity to expand our understanding of silence and how it connects to our spirituality. But how? Maybe this story from the community of Matthew's gospel is more helpful than it first appears.

We might keep in mind as we look at these questions through the lens of our discipleship is that Jesus was not white. The woman who he is talking to is not white. Yet his silence is dismissive of someone on the margins. This silence is not the kind of silence that is making way for the presence of God. Yet the woman will not let this idea go. This whole scene is horrible. Let's not whitewash it into something it is not. This woman is following Jesus and the disciples, crying, calling out, begging for mercy. Jesus ignores her. She continues to cry out, so much so that she is annoying the disciples who beg him to send her away. It is finally her body that she uses to elicit some response from him. She kneels before him, presumably so he cannot go any further, and says, "Lord, help me." He breaks his silence but his response is not promising or very kind. Who is this Jesus with limits? Who is this Jesus who is limiting God's grace? It is such a human silence. This Jesus is not the Jesus we want him to be. Her body still in front of

him, she counters his words with her own. She challenges the limits, just as she challenged his silence. It is like suddenly a switch is flipped. He listens. He responds.

I don't want to explain away Jesus' silence in this story. His intent feels dismissive in the way it is told. His silence is balanced in this story but the voice of the women. A woman who typically does not have room to speak. A woman who often would not be heard. If Jesus shows us what NOT to do with his silence, he shows us in equal measure what TO DO with his hearing the woman's argument and reversing his position in verse 28. The strength of silence comes if we listen, and here we witness Jesus misusing silence in verses 23-25, and then reshaping his silence into action by the end of this story. The frailty and misgivings of our silence, past, present, future, does not have to define us. If we listen, even in times when we are mistakenly silent, we can change. Jesus doesn't give us an unreachable standard that we will never be silent in the face of racism, or suffering, or oppression. Instead, Jesus shows us a way to change, a way to discern between kinds of silence.

I read a very moving blog post by the woman who runs the Café Con Libros bookstore in Brooklyn. On May 31, she posted an entry about stillness and silence. A woman of color, she confessed to being silent in those weeks after Breonna Taylor and George Floyd were killed. She explains it this way:

The truth is, like many of you, I've felt overwhelmed. I've felt overrun by the senselessness, brazeness, frequency, and compounding nature of it all. It's not just Breonna Taylor or George Floyd; it's stacks of Black bodies in my psyche. It's the story of "Esi" in "Homegoing." Or, Recy Taylor in "At the End of the Dark Street." Insert Black/Brown name here. For the past two months, my family has started our days discussing the innumerable ways America continues to almost methodically fail people of color and specifically, Black people with such precision. We've spent weeks living our lives against the background sound of ambulance sirens; Emiliano now says "ambulance" each time one passes. He has almost perfected the word at 23 months. In response, I say "say a prayer;" not trusting the local hospital has the resources to save these Black or Brown lives. Sit with that.

...

So, I've sat in silence. At one point, refusing to discuss any of it with family and friends.

Out of sheer exhaustion, I chose self-preservation. I feel guilty about it and yet, I know it's my right and it's necessary for my survival.^v

She shares a story with the Canaanite woman, a story of choosing within the spiritual discipline of silence and speaking to ensure her survival. The nuances of this choice are never easy, especially for those people at the margins.

Our discipleship teaches us that for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

- ² a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
- ³ a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
- ⁴ a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
- ⁵ a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
- ⁶ a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
- ⁷ a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

Speaking and silence are both part of our spiritual lives as disciples. Yet we must not mistake the choices. We must be astute enough disciples to know the difference. We must trust ourselves to speak when the stakes demand we must trust ourselves to understand like the Canaanite woman, that sometimes our voice is not enough and our body must accompany our voice to be heard. The Canaanite woman teaches us this practice. We must also trust ourselves to know when to keep spiritual silence. For renewal, but also wisdom's sake.

We must know when to keep silent to leave others room to speak, to let others tell their story, even the story of their spiritual silence, to make room for more than our voice. We who are white must break the silence of racism and yet remain strong in our embrace of those, especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color who are too weary to speak. We do not need to let this experience be overwhelming. Choosing between silence and speaking is a spiritual practice. Jesus teaches us by his own error in being silent that we won't get it right all the time, but must revisit silence over and over and over, listening for what the silence tells us from the center and the margins.

ⁱ Carter, Warren. 2000. Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), p. 17.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 19-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 321.

^{iv} <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/159258>

^v <https://www.cafeconlibrosbk.com/post/on-silence-stillness-and-self-preservation>