

“For Zion’s Sake I Cannot Keep Silent”

Each year we set aside a day to honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It is to honor the man and the cause of equality for all for which he worked and for which he was killed. As a white man I am among the most privileged people in this world. Some might ask how I can even talk about the struggle for equality that Dr. King waged. I am the ultimate outsider, even if I want to consider myself an ally to the cause. I cannot know what it means to be vilified and suffer prejudice just because of my skin color. I can’t. However, I have three stories from my life that I want to share which made me acutely aware of the power of skin color in the world.

Not long after I graduated from college I worked for the U.S. Census Bureau. The Bureau was renting part of a high-rise office building in the nearly abandoned city center of Newport News. One night I was without a ride home so I walked. To get home I needed to walk through a predominantly black neighborhood. There I went walking purposefully up the street wearing a Mickey Mouse t-shirt, jeans, sneakers and carrying a backpack. I could not have stood out more if I wanted. Kids on the street yelled at me, called me names, and jeered. I wondered if this is what a black man would have encountered in a white neighborhood. But I also knew that no one would call the cops on me for being in the wrong place. For all of the verbal harassment no one tried to chase me out or threaten me with physical violence. It might have felt a little scary, but I was actually quite safe because I am a white man.

Some years later when living in Baltimore my girlfriend and I regularly attended baseball games. We learned from a friend that there was a neighborhood near the stadium where we could leave the car on the street and save on parking fees. The neighborhood was typical for Baltimore. Each block was lined with rowhouses made of brick or formstone. Each had the typical front stoop where people visited neighbors and cooled off on hot nights. The folks who lived in the neighborhood were predominantly African-American families. Streets that normally had few cars and little traffic were taken over by baseball fans who were mostly white. I think of how Middleburg blocks off streets and lots from parking for the Christmas Parade. That is an event the town invites people to attend and yet we don’t want them parking at our curbs. The folks in that Baltimore neighborhood did not have the clout a similar white neighborhood would have had to prevent the takeover of their streets.

Then not too long ago I had the opportunity to go on pilgrimage to visit with two missionaries working with AIDS orphans in South Africa. The trip was more than eye-opening it was traumatizing. I had the image of South Africa post-apartheid as a country that was achieving equality. I could not have been more wrong. When we visited locations in the Eastern Cape the white population went from zero to five. We were a curiosity. Many of the people in those areas knew of white people but had seen few in the flesh. The places we visited were locations to which black people had been displaced, actually dumped, during apartheid. There had been nothing there before and there was little there now. There were no grocery stores, cinemas, or shops. The people had to take a bus trip two hours one way to get to a town. Imagine being so isolated that you had to take a bus to Richmond for a job or to shop for groceries. Oh, and by the way, there was only one bus in the morning and one in the evening. So if you missed it you were out of luck.

Once when I was in Illenge I was to meet with a grandmother who was raising her grandchildren who were AIDS orphans. At one point while we were searching for her we went into the town hall. Not a grand building but a cinder block building with a large auditorium. Many people were there waiting for a government official to come; it was standing room only. When I walked in the room it immediately quietened. My skin color indicated that I must be the official with power and all should pay attention.

Later in the grandmother's house I helped her do some house cleaning. In what seemed like a futile effort I was sweeping the dirt off of the linoleum that was simply rolled out on top of the dirt floor. The walls were corrugated tin and the doors were just cloth draped over openings. Despite what seemed to me to be conditions of extreme poverty this woman was house proud. It was important that it be kept as neat and tidy as possible; especially since she was raising two young children there. When the neighbors saw that a white man was doing cleaning for a black woman they started taking walks by the home peering at me. It was something they had never seen before. I promised to come back the following year and bring paste wax to polish her floors. That was a promise I am ashamed to say I did not keep.

How things would have been so different if the community were white and I was a black man wandering into it. I would have been watched not out of curiosity but because I might be a threat. Children would have been called in from play. Doors would have been bolted. Police would have been called. As we are aware from recent news in this country I might have been chased by vigilantes. I was out of place but not a threat because my skin color marked me as protected.

These are not ancient history. They happened in 1980, 1990s, and 2009. In the past fourteen years we have had a two-term African-American president and now an African-American Vice President. We think we have made great strides in racial justice in the fifty-four years since Dr. King's assassination. Yet we know that incidents like the killings of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery are not unusual, but just captured the national headlines because of the video evidence available.

As long as there are the injustices that require court battles to remedy them there is no justice. As long as we see people of color stopped from carrying on their everyday lives, vilified, chased down, beaten, and murdered just because of the color of their skin then there is no justice. The Rev. Dr. King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" rings out from sixty-five years ago as if it were written yesterday. It is an impatient call to justice for all people regardless of color, religion, political affiliation, education, gender, sexual identity, or any other way that we divide ourselves.

The prophet Amos spoke God's words against the Northern Kingdom of Israel more than 2,500 years ago because their leaders treated their poor, widowed, and orphaned unjustly. These Israelites thought that because they were God's chosen people they could do as they pleased. Martin Luther King Jr in his "I have a Dream" speech recalled Amos's words when he said, "we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."¹

Indeed, none of us should be satisfied until the words of Amos are fulfilled for all people everywhere. And the dream of Dr. King and so many others is fulfilled in the sight of God, the creator, sustainer and redeemer of **all** people **everywhere**.

¹ Amos 5:24