No Salve in Silence (Jer. 8:19b-23)
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I don't remember what he was wearing. I don't remember what his text was. I don't remember the person who introduced him. I just remember him stepping to the lectern at the First Baptist Church of Dayton, Ohio and greeting us all with a subversive smile. Most of us had not heard Jeremiah Wright preach before and he surely knew it. He had come to the Alliance of Baptists convocation at our invitation. We were a group of some diversity, but honestly we were mostly white liberals from small congregations throughout the country. Wright was the minister of the Trinity United Church of Christ, a congregation on the South Side of Chicago with some 6,000 members, most of them, like himself, people of color. And before he began to speak to us there was just that moment of silence. The black preacher looked at the white church and we looked back at him. He placed his notes on the lectern, drew a deep breath, and flashed that smile. Jeremiah had a few things to say.

He broke the silence gently at first as he began to read from the biblical text in a slow, poetic cadence. Then he began to ruminate on the reading, asking questions from this direction and that about what it might mean. It felt like we were just easing into the sermon until somehow, in an almost subtle way, Rev. Wright began to turn up the volume. Leaving that opening silence and its relatively calm questions behind, he began to usher us into a more urgent conversation. Before I knew it, he had taken the sacred story off the page and brought it to bear directly on the present context. He related the text directly to the war that was being waged in our names and causing the deaths of thousands of innocents halfway around the world. He related the text directly to the

plight of the poor and the working class who existed at the increasing margins of our society without health care or the hope of much of an education for their children. And he related the text directly to the oppressive history of slavery and the current practices of racism and white privilege in America. As he spoke, Jeremiah's cadence picked up and his voice raised and lowered, occasionally turning to a near growl as he offered one pointed insight or another. I remember that several times he made me laugh out loud with his irreverent sense of humor and the brashness of his honesty. People clapped and whooped. "Oh no you didn't." I remember that more than once I was on the verge of tears as I listened to a black man speak so powerfully about racism and how it lessens the humanity of both the oppressed and the oppressors. I remember that my heart raced, my temperature rose, and the time flew by. I think I could have stayed all night I was having such a time. But I also remember walking back to the hotel after that rollicking service came to an end. The streets of Dayton were quiet by comparison, there was a soft breeze coming off the Great Miami River, and I couldn't quite shake the feeling that I'd just heard a voice that was truly prophetic.

I've been thinking about that night a lot in recent weeks as the national media spotlight has been focused on Jeremiah Wright and Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. As I suppose most of you already know, Wright was the longtime pastor to one of the current presidential candidates, Senator Barack Obama, and, as such, he and his church have been dragged into the current political campaign. Sound bites taken out of the context of both the sermons of which they were a part and the rich history of the black religious experience in America were played over and over again to create an image of Jeremiah Wright and Trinity United Church that was distorted and dishonest. As I

watched the coverage unfold, many of you heard me voice my own frustrations at the way I felt a genuine opportunity was slipping away. For we had been given the chance to look more deeply into the context of black experience and listen more carefully to both the extraordinary pain and deeply rooted hope of that experience. We had been given the chance to look again at the violence and exploitation in our history and ask some critical questions. We had been given the chance to revisit the conversation that Dr. King started about race in America and the achievement of real, substantive equality for all of her people. But instead of entering into such a conversation, it seems to me that the media was content to run sound bites, write dismissive opinion pieces, play the political game, and tap into the fear of our differences. There have been a few exceptions, such as the Bill Moyers program that aired Friday evening, but by and large I would say that we have not taken the opportunity to listen and think and struggle.[1] We don't really want to talk about racism. And so many of us simply choose not to.

Black theologian James Cone, who has taught at Union Theological Seminary for a generation, asks a question that is as prophetic as anything Jeremiah Wright has ever asked in one of his fiery sermons. In his essay, "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy," Cone asks, "Why don't whites write and speak about racism?"[2] Cone is asking his question specifically of theologians and church people. He is asking, more pointedly, why don't white *Christians* write and speak about racism? He wants to know where the silence comes from, what it means, and how we might begin to push through it. Our collective silence, he suggests, hurts us all, and it will keep hurting

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[1] *Bill Moyers Journal*, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, April 25, 2008.

[2] James Cone, "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy" in *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue*, ed. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003), 6.

us until we begin to address it. And while white silence in the face of racism is far too complex a subject to analyze within the space of a few paragraphs on a Sunday morning, there are a few things that we might note from Cone's work to help us. He offers four insights into the nature of our silence that we would do well to consider.

According to James Cone, the first reason that whites do not talk about racism is that we do not *have* to talk about it. "[Whites]," Cone says, "have most of the power in the world—economic, political, social, cultural, intellectual, and religious. There is little that blacks and other people of color can do to change the power relationships in the churches, in seminaries, and in society. Powerful people do not talk, except on their own terms and almost never at the behest of others."[3] So we do not talk about racism because we do not feel the pressing need to talk about it and we are the ones who control the conversation, whether we acknowledge it or not. Cone tells us that, in our daily lives, we rarely think about or are affected by what the black community thinks or does. The reverse, however, is not true: black people are constantly impacted by the behavior of the white community that still controls the levers of power in our society.

Moving into a deeper conversation, Cone says that the second reason whites do not talk about racism is that it arouses deep feelings of guilt within us. All of us are aware of the fact that our current nation state was built on a history that includes the genocide of indigenous people and the forced labor of enslaved Africans. In fact, the stories of the European settling of this continent are as barbaric and cruel as any stories we'll ever hear. More often than not, we'd really prefer not to hear them at all as they evoke such strong responses of guilt, shame, and grief. We do not like to think of ourselves as the

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[3] Cone, "Theology's Great Sin," 6.

beneficiaries of such a history, though we are its descendants and we are still advantaged by a system set up to favor people with lighter skin. We prefer to speak of our own individual lives and personal choices rather than our collective past. Seeking to avoid feelings of historical guilt, we say, "*I* am not a racist," "*I* am colorblind," or "*I* do not discriminate." But such personal piety is too slow to name the hard truth that to be white in America historically and presently is to be given a distinct advantage. Cone writes, "We cannot just embrace what is good about America and ignore the bad. We must accept the responsibility to do everything we can to correct America's past and present wrongs."[4]

A third reason we are offered for our reluctance to speak about racism is that we do not want to encounter legitimate black rage. We do not know what to do with the righteous indignation of people of color and so we arrange our lives so that they do not come into contact with it. But Cone urges us to reconsider listening to the anger as a way of connecting with our shared humanity. He writes, "All I ask of whites is to put themselves in black people's place in this society and the world, and then ask themselves what they would say or do if they were in black people's place. Would you be angry about 246 years of slavery and 100 years of lynching and segregation? What would you say about the incarceration of one million of your people in prisons—one-half of the penal population—while your people represent only 12 percent of the U.S. census? Would you get angry if your racial group used only 13 percent of the drugs but did 74 percent of the prison time for simple possession? Would you caution the oppressed in *your* community to speak about their pain with calm and patience? What would you say

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[4] Ibid., 8.

about your sons who are shot dead by the police because their color alone makes them prime criminal suspects? What would you say about ministers and theologians who preach and teach about justice and love but ignore the sociopolitical oppression of your people?"[5] This litany of grievances merely scratches the surface of black experience, but, with it, Cone asks if we shouldn't all rightly be angry about the treatment of people of color. Then he offers a final reason that we may have fallen so silent on the matter of race.

"Whites do not say much about racial justice because they are not prepared for a radical redistribution of wealth and power."[6] In Cone's estimation, we avoid the subject of our history because justice would then demand that we make reparations of a kind. At the moment, we are too comfortably ensconced to have that conversation. Indeed, even when we do begin to talk about it, Cone warns that our language quickly reverts to the manageable conversation about individual action rather than the more difficult subject matter of how to change the structures and systems that hold white privilege and power so firmly in place. Again, we find ourselves reluctant to talk about racism for fear of what it would cost us.

I stand at the lectern this morning a white preacher in a largely white, liberal congregation to say that I find a great deal of truth in the preaching of Jeremiah Wright and the critical thought of James Cone. Each of these men has offered us a prophetic voice from the community of color and it is my hope that we will choose to hear them. But there is another voice that I would like to add to the mix. It is the voice of a different

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[5] Ibid., 9.
[6] Ibid., 12.

Jeremiah, the biblical prophet who lamented the people's brokenness and suffering, though much of it was their own doing.

At the end of Jeremiah Chapter 8, we are given the heartbreaking words of ancient Hebrew poetry. They were not written for our context, but I think an analogy may be made. Because the prophet is lamenting the people's history and the place it has led them. Earlier in the book he mentions the particular sins and outlines the judgments to follow, but at this point he is simply grieving. "Because my people is shattered I am shattered;" the prophet writes, "I am dejected, [I am] seized by desolation."[7] Perhaps what is most striking is that it is not at all clear if the prophet is writing in his own voice or in the divine voice. God is brokenhearted, the prophet is brokenhearted, and it is nearly impossible to tell them apart. They cry out that a painful history has left everyone wounded and they know not where to find a salve for the scars that will not heal. In one of the prophet's most famous utterances, he asks mournfully, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Can no physician be found? Why has healing not yet come to my poor people?"[8] And if Jeremiah Wright were here, I think he would lay the same questions on us all. Is there no healing for our nation? Can no one be found to tend this wound? Why are we still suffering so? And what will it take to break our silence? He might even note that scholars tell us that the ancients used different kinds of balms.[9] One actually promoted the healing of a wound while the other simply covered the smell while it continued to

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[7] Jeremiah 8:21 in *The Jewish Study Bible: featuring the Jewish Publication Society TANAKH Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 943.
[8] Jeremiah 8:22.
[9] Patrick D. Miller, "Jeremiah 8:4-9:1 Commentary" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Vol. VI* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 648.

fester. If Jeremiah were here, either Jeremiah, I can't help but think he'd ask what kind of balm we've been using for our wound to be so fresh after all this time.

All I can do this morning is suggest that the healing balm will be found when we first break through our silence on racism in America. The first step for us need only be naming that we have been silent, confessing it in a way, and then inviting a conversation with ourselves and our sisters and brothers of color. Much of this initial conversation should simply consist of listening. White America needs to listen to black America. We need to listen to Jeremiah Wright and James Cone. But we also need to listen the myriad other voices of black experience if we are to begin to truly tend the deepest wound of our national history and the most profound threat to our shared humanity. For the truth is that inasmuch as we deny the humanity of our sisters and brothers, we limit and hurt ourselves alongside them. Inasmuch as we silently go along with a status quo that doesn't work for everybody, we allow something of our own human spirit to wither and die. And inasmuch as we do not actively love our neighbors as the rabbi taught us, we cannot really claim to love ourselves or our God.

This sermon began with a memory of an Alliance of Baptists convocation. That particular gathering took place in 2004. Two years afterwards, at the Alliance of Baptists meeting in Birmingham, Alabama, a statement on racism and repentance was adopted. That statement read, in part, "We are coming to understand that repenting of our racism is not a one-time event but a long and demanding process. As an expression of our repentance we commit to engage and re-engage in the hard process, the necessary process, the life-giving process of turning away from our racism…We commit ourselves anew to discerning the ways racism is present in [us]. We commit ourselves anew to an

intentional process of becoming an anti-racist organization. We commit ourselves anew to the establishment of meaningful relationships with communities of color. We commit ourselves anew to the full inclusion of persons of color in…leadership. We commit ourselves anew to address issues of importance to communities of color…"[10]

And a final statement made by the Alliance of Baptists this year at the convocation in New Orleans and sent to Jeremiah Wright and the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. "To our faithful sisters and brothers," it said. "[We] offer our prayers, support, and gratitude for your liberating message of peace and justice throughout your history and now 'for such a time as this' we stand with you and commit ourselves to prayer for your pastors and congregation as you continue to boldly bear witness…"[11] As an Alliance of Baptists member congregation, these are statements that we can be proud of. But they are also statements that we can take to heart.

If we are truly to get at the deep wound of racism in America, then white churches must risk breaking the silence. We must move beyond our comfort, our guilt, our fear, and our privilege to find something infinitely more valuable: the common humanity that we share with all people and that they would share with us. And we must take as our mantra those words of Dr. King, that great American prophet who said: "It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the

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[10] "A Statement on Racism and Repentance" adopted at the Alliance of Baptists annual convocation in Birmingham, Alabama, April 22, 2006.
[11] "To Our Faithful Brothers and Sisters in the Trinity United Church of Christ, Chicago" adopted at the Alliance of Baptists annual convocation in New Orleans, Louisiana, March 29, 2008.

violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people…"[12]

Good people, there is no salve in our silence. Let us find the courage to speak. In the hope of healing for us all…

May it be so.

[12] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution" in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 270.