

Loosing the Silence

by Paul Booth

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9)

A newly constructed monument invades the grounds of the mall on Washington in our nation's capital, symbolizing an iconic Messenger of justice, whose relentless mission to rebirth and re-baptize America summons us once more to consciously excuse ourselves from the table of selfish denial and sit at the counter of integrity. Our individual and collective integrity is eroding rapidly because the equality that we have achieved has not broken the ultimate silence the Dreamer sacrificially gave his life for. This equality is one that meets you at your doorstep rather whether you live on main street or back street.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., during a critical punctuation in our nation's history from the preeminent pulpit of Riverside Church in New York, once again pricked the conscience of a broken nation in his sermon message "Beyond Vietnam a Time to Break Silence" when he audaciously proclaimed, "We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation and for those it calls "enemy," for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers."

There is a silence that is gripping the voice of freedom in America, causing us to omit one of the greatest injustices in the 21st century from the light of public discourse. Mass incarceration is destroying the very foundations of our legal system while jeopardizing the long-term stability of families and communities. Our blatant dismissal and denial of such a systemic flaw reveals once more the depth of our moral depravity. In our text, Genesis 4:9, the Lord challenges the reckless behavior of Cain toward his brother Abel by asking "Where is your brother Abel?" and Cain's reply of "Am I my brother's keeper?" signifies a blatant disregard for the welfare and well-being of his brother when he knows he had just killed him. His unapologetic denunciation of human concern and divine responsibility represent an insulated self-righteousness that detrimental and destructive.

Cain's response also exudes an arrogance and complacency for the act he selfishly committed. When we continue to dismiss, discount, and denounce the alarming incarceration rate of non-violent offenders we become like Cain perpetuating a sense of approval and removing ourselves from the condition of our neighbor while being guilty of their condition. We've got to loose the silence because:

- 1 in every 15 black males age 18 and older are incarcerated.

We've got to loose the silence because:

- Half of all prisoners locked up in state prisons are non-violent offenders.

It's time to loose the silence!

- Though 275,000 prisoners were released in 1994, 67.5% were rearrested within 3 years, and 51.8% were back in prison.

There is a mandate to loose the silence!

- The U.S. prison population rose by 700 percent from 1970-2005 while the general population growth rate was 44 percent.¹

We've been divinely appointed to loose the silence!

No longer can we allow capitalism and right-wing conservatism to fuel the lock-'em-up campaign! As the church we must reverse the silence by rebuking that Cain spirit that is bridling our social justice witness! We've got to remember that we are being held accountable by the ultimate Kingdom standard Christ gave in Matthew 22:37: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

If my neighbor is suffering, if my neighbor is locked out of opportunity, if my neighbor has been derailed from their destiny, depleted from their misfortune, and caught up by their circumstance, it is my divine assignment to speak up until justice arrives, lobby until the law is legislated, and pray until God's peace is restored!

As we seek to eradicate the mass incarceration plague that has gripped the pockets of our national budget to over 50 billion since 2001,² let us prepare to loose the silence by reclaiming our neighbor as Christ has commanded! We must ignite a movement that reverses the mass silence to mass discussion! As we usher in this movement into the public forum we've got to sing that timeless hymn of the Civil Movement like Mahalia Jackson sang it:

*If I can help somebody as I pass along,
If I can cheer somebody with a word or song,
If I can show somebody he's traveling wrong,
Then my living will not be in vain.
If I can do my duty as a Christian ought,
If I can bring salvation to a world once wrought,
If I can spread the message as the master taught,
Then my living will not be in vain!*³

Notes

1. American Civil Liberties Union. Online location: www.aclu.org/combating-mass-incarceration-facts-0.

2. Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Dep't of Justice, Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics (31st ed. 2003), available at <http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook>.

3. http://www.lyricsmania.com/if_i_can_help_somebody_lyrics_mahalia_jackson.html.