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Acts 7:51-60

## HEARING VOICES

For participating in a gun law reform demonstration on the Tennessee state legislature floor, Representatives Justin Jones and Justin Pearson were expelled from their elected positions. They had been endeavoring to give voice to the voices in their community who were outraged by yet another mass shooting of school children and who were calling for greater gun safety laws. Not long afterwards, Montana state representative Zoey Zephyr, a transgendered woman, was expelled from the House chamber for the rest of the legislative year after she objected to a bill that would ban gender-affirming care for transgendered minors in Montana. Zephyr was silenced for warning the state lawmakers about the real life and death consequences such a bill would have for transgender teens who already have alarmingly high rates of suicide.

These stories came to my mind as I was reading the passage from Acts 7 for today about the newly commissioned deacon Stephen whose prophetic voice and life were silenced with a public stoning. Those hearing Stephen's testimony about God's activity revealed in Jesus were so enraged by what he said that "they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him."

What happened to Stephen was both barbaric and shocking. What happened to the little school children in Nashville, TN, and in Uvalde, TX, and in Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT are both barbaric and shocking. The bullying and violence perpetrated against LGBTQ+ individuals in the course of their daily lives is both barbaric and shocking. The racist violence against black men and women by some members of law enforcement and self-appointed vigilantes is both barbaric and shocking. The atrocity committed one year ago here in Buffalo

against black men and women and grandmothers and children doing their grocery shopping at a store not far from this church is both barbaric and shocking.

These acts are all barbaric and shocking. And equally problematic are the efforts to silence the voices of those who object, those who speak against social injustices, those who attempt to tell the truth about their lives, and the silencing of the voices of those people who are engaging our society in difficult conversations. Elements of our society behave like those who couldn't stand to hear what Stephen had to say: they cover their ears by banning books from school libraries, or prohibiting certain topics to be discussed in schools, or by literally kicking representatives off the floors of legislative chambers.

Voices can be silenced both intentionally, as we saw with the Tennessee and Montana cases, by literally taking away a person's platform or means of redress. And voices can be silenced indirectly, which we do when we ignore or dismiss those voices we don't wish to hear, whose voices are inconvenient to listen to, whose voices challenge us in some way. However it is done, silencing the voices of those who lack power is itself a form of violence.

What took place one year ago at a grocery store in our city was an act of horrifying violence. What our region came to reckon with was that this violence grew out of an indirect kind of violence that had been permitted to exist in our city over the decades in which the voices and needs of a large segment of Buffalo's population were ignored and increasingly segregated from the rest of Buffalo. Meanwhile, our society has offered greater platforms for the voices of hatred and has indulged intolerant speech from government leaders.

Throughout the gospel accounts, Jesus gives attention to the voices of the overlooked, and the oppressed, and the despised, and the marginalized. And he often speaks an uncomfortable truth to those in positions of power or status, a truth that often angered the leaders

of his community. Those who objected to Jesus tried to silence him—to silence not only what he said but also to silence his actions of mercy, compassion, and inclusion. His voice was a direct challenge to the dominant culture.

Our Christian faith encourages us to be suspicious of the dominant voice of our culture. That doesn't mean that the dominant voice is always wrong. But it ought to be regarded with a careful analytical eye. Because the dominant voice often protects those in positions of power. The dominant voice often protects the status quo. The dominant voice is the voice of the prevailing culture. And the Easter life we are called to live by Christ is counter-cultural.

The esteemed Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann states that, “Practicing Easter life continues to be risky because it contradicts the deathly commitments of our world—one devoured by greed, anxiety, and violence.”

As followers of Jesus, *we* listen for and elevate voices not heard by the dominant culture—the voices of peoples long silenced, the voices of the overlooked, the voices of the vulnerable. How do we do this? How do we hear other voices? There are some practical steps for doing this but we will need to be intentional.

We can get our news from more than one source.

We can read. Books are wonderful ways to hear other voices. The Community Committee of our congregation has created a Racial Justice Library downstairs in the Fellowship Room. You'll find on the bookshelf downstairs a couple shelves of books by authors who offer a perspective that the dominate white culture of America may not always listen to. But *you* can.

Speaking of books, I will highlight a real gem of an opportunity right here in Buffalo. The Just Buffalo Literary Center hosts the Babel lecture series each year, which brings to our city some of world's greatest authors. This is an incredible event right here in Buffalo, and I

don't know of any other city that does such an event. Four times a year, Kleinhans is filled with people who gather to listen to an amazing author speak about their latest book. What is great about this event is the wide diversity of authors they bring in—which enables us to hear from voices we might never have heard otherwise, voices from a wide variety of cultures and communities and experiences and perspectives and struggles.

How else can we hear other voices? We can attend events about matters of community concern and listen to what those without a lot of power or status are saying. And we can always ask ourselves in the events of our lives and our world, “whose voice is missing?” We should do this when reading the Bible. Whose voice is missing?

In last week's scripture passage, Jesus referred to himself as the shepherd and he spoke about how the sheep know his voice and follow his voice. In today's reading from the same gospel, Jesus' voice, the one we are to listen to, Jesus' voice points to the way, the truth, and the life he promotes—the way, the truth, and the life which are grounded in God's love and compassion and the belief that all people are valuable to God.

*That's* the voice we Christians are called to listen to. We listen to Jesus' voice--the voice of radical love, abundant generosity, profound compassion, extravagant mercy, and astonishing inclusion. These are the very building blocks of the way, the truth, and the life Jesus speaks of. We listen for Jesus' voice teaching us and leading us to live and love this way, this truth, and this life. And then, and then we join the risky Easter business of becoming tellers of this truth.