

## Are We Listening? June 1, 2020

In times like this I miss the voice of historic leaders who found a way to brilliantly weave reality with prophecy, peace with justice, and love in the midst of times when it is so very easy to hate. One of those amazing, God-led leaders was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the midst of a context that created chaos and controversy, it was Dr. King who said, *“Certain conditions continue to exist in our society, which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard.”*

Today, what Dr. King referred to as a “riot” is typically more accurately framed as an expression of internal fear, pain and suffering forced outward. It’s much like an unattended pot, filled to the brim which overflows when heat is applied. Today, that heat is Covid-19. That heat was Ahmaud Arbery. That heat was George Floyd. And what we’re seeing is an overflow of being unheard, downplayed and unimportant.

When human beings feel unheard, frustration rises. When someone feels unheard, they feel downplayed and unimportant. When someone feels unheard, they believe that no one is listening and hurt turns into anger.

It begs the simple question: Are we listening to what is being said?

In order to actually hear what is being said, we must filter out the noises that drown out the real message being spoken. We have to filter out the noise created by those who are looting and promoting violent actions around us. We have to filter out the desires of some to retaliate with like actions in an effort to somehow level the playing field. We have to filter out political motivations that attempt to take a situation like we are facing and use it to create political advantage or promote a political position. The filters have to be in place to remove the noise so that we can truly listen to those who feel unheard.

And when we do, what is it that we hear? What is truly being said?

While there is much being said, I have heard three distinct things these past few days. People are saying, **“We are sick.”** Literally and figuratively, we are sick. We are only now emerging with some sense of life in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is not over. We have lost 105,000 people in less than three months. Thousands remain ill. And many of those have been infected because of systemic racism and limited access to vital resources. Lower economic security, inadequate health care, jobs that don’t carry with them the luxury of a “work at home” option and living arrangements that can’t allow for social distancing have created a scenario that have made us sick. All of this has built and built over the last three months and the frustrations are spilling over. Can you hear it? We are sick.

**We are tired.** George Floyd’s death tipped us into an international outcry: “We are tired!” We are tired of witnessing unjust actions that demonstrate how ineffectively we have dealt with racism for years. We are tired of being victimized by people in power who have maintained their superiority by suppressing people and making them less than the human beings they were created to be. We are tired of a justice system that is broken, a government that is more concerned with a party or a re-election than they are with creating solutions to help us address systemic racism, injustice, and feelings that have reached a breaking point. We are tired of speaking in the moment and not seeing anything change over time. There are many who are angry and desperate for something to truly change. Can you hear it? We are tired.

**We are dying.** The list of names is long. George Floyd is the latest. The list of those victimized by racial injustice and privilege is long. And each time another victim surfaces, it is only a matter of time before another headline takes priority and the memory of the name fades. But this time, those who feel unheard

are crying out. Enough is enough. This just can't go on. We are dying.

**We are sick and tired and dying.** And as a result, there are mass protests taking place across the country. Hats off to those who have felt the need and found the courage to take to the streets in non-violent protesting. Hats off to police officers who have taken off their helmets, put down their batons and simply said, "We want to walk with you. We really do." Hats off to those who are truly working for George Floyd's death to not just be another number and another disappointing verdict. Hats off to anyone who is able to filter out the noise, remove the temptations, and simply say, "I hear you and I stand with you."

I have described three feelings. And when someone reads this, they will inevitably say, "He didn't mention this," or "He forgot that," or "I wish he had said this." And if you are one of those people, in all likelihood, you are right. You see, for everything we hear, there is something we always miss. These are days when there is not one teacher, one prophet, one ear. These are days to teach one another, seek prophetic words that will inspire one another, and use as many ears as possible to make sure that we are listening to the cries of voices all around us.

Tonight, Sally and I have just returned from a quick trip to Charlotte, North Carolina, to see our daughter, son-in-law and, of course, our two-year old grandson. Amazingly we had a few days with nothing on the calendar, so we masked up and drove eleven hours to be with our family. On the way home, we were traveling north through very congested traffic when we came upon an "express lane." With EZ-Pass in place we eased to the left and encountered an empty highway. We breezed along with no traffic in front of us. But to our right there were trucks, and old cars, and lots of traffic. Our journey was easy but right next to us were those who had to fight the traffic and the consequences of not having an "easy pass."

As we drove, it became clear that we were driving in an illustration. There we were, people who were benefitting from the privilege of having a road empty of traffic all because we could afford the toll. Next to us, just a lane away, were those who were not offered the privilege because their vehicle was prohibited or because they did not have the means to take an easier route.

You see, systemic racism and acts of injustice are just a lane away. And, as long as we continue to isolate ourselves on the road of the easy pass many of us have been given, we will just drive by and not hear the cries of frustration and pain that is within the range of our hearing. Can you hear it? We are sick. We are tired. We are dying.

It begs the question: What can and should we be doing? Peaceful protesting, acknowledging the pain that the sin of racism is inflicting upon people of color, not being silent as we call out the injustices around us, and genuinely saying "I hear you and I want to walk with you," are important steps. I pledge to do that. I plan to listen carefully and deeply not only to come to a better understanding but to solicit the voices of those who have not been heard in order to meet the needs that they are expressing. And I aim, as I always do, to weave together the social context with the biblical mandate that gives us the purpose and direction we need to move forward as disciples of Jesus Christ.

As we navigate these turbulent waters, seeking spiritual guidance for the steps we take, I pray that you and I will never use our Bibles as a prop for a photo opportunity. It's not just "a" Bible. It is "our" Bible. Open it tonight. Read it. It will describe to you the journey of a people who could never get it right and a Savior who never got it wrong. And when you raise your Bible in public, you will know what it says inside.

It speaks of peace.

When the order of the day was an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, Jesus said,  
*Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you.*  
*I do not give to you as the world gives.*  
*Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*  
(John 14:27)

It speaks of Justice.

*Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*  
(Amos 5:23-24)

It speaks of Hope.

*I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,  
my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.*  
(Psalm 130:4-6)

It speaks of Love.

*Keep alert, stand firm in your faith,  
be courageous, be strong.  
Let all that you do be done in love.*  
(I Corinthians 16:13)

And as the writer of Philippians says,

*Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in  
me, and the God of peace will be with you.*  
(Philippians 4:3)

Dr. King was right. A riot IS the language of the unheard. In fact, tonight, it is more than a riot. All around us, there are non-violent protesters, loved ones of victims, and generations of people who have put up with racism their whole lives and feel like their lives don't matter. They are speaking in whatever way they can. They are sick and tired of this.

Can you hear them? Are you listening?

The Journey Continues, . . .

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Bickerton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the left.

Thomas Bickerton  
Resident Bishop