

If You See Something, Say Something

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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Out of all the moon landing commemorations, I did not see one mention of my favorite artist's excellent work: Gil Scott Heron's "Whitey on the Moon," which analyzes with breathtaking clarity a sentiment that is not often mentioned on this 50th anniversary – that for all the excitement and imagination and technological advancement that moon landing produced, there was a sense that it used resources in a way that seemed almost insulting:

Was all that money I made las' year
(for Whitey on the moon?)
How come there ain't no money here?
(Hm! Whitey's on the moon)
Y'know I jus' 'bout had my fill
(of Whitey on the moon)
I think I'll sen' these doctor bills,
Airmail special
(to Whitey on the moon)

Now the moon landing did a lot of good for this country and for technological advancement, but it had a cost, and it is well argued in his work that the moon landing is complicit in ignoring African American struggles for equality. I'm glad I could share it with you, both because it's excellent, and because it is a nice way to shift some of the conversation to our topic this morning.

Today, we're going to talk a little about complicity, because I think that it's something that many people are wrestling with in these trying times. What does it mean to live through an era in which people with power are using that power in ways that do not uphold people's inherent worth and dignity? What do you do when you live in times that demand moral action? In some ways this is a bit of a personal essay, a bit of a working out of things as they relate to us ethically and spiritually, but the thing about these times is that they demand an accounting from each individual. That's what makes them tough to live through.

I began to think about complicity because someone volunteered to sing rum to molasses to slaves, and I was in a bit of a pickle about how that might be appropriate on a Sunday morning. Anyone who's watched *1776*, which was historical founding father drama that preceded *Hamilton*, knows that this is sung by the delegate from Virginia to John Adams, who is so sure of the rightness of Massachusetts's moral position on slavery, even while he continues to personally and politically benefit from the institution. John Adams is complicit, and while it's not exactly a huge moral act to say, "you think I'm

bad, well you're bad too," it ought to cause people with good liberal politics to pause and reflect on the ways that the system is set up to benefit them without getting their hands and consciences dirty.

When we look at scripture there's one word that I'm fairly certain will get me in trouble this morning, and I'm a bit OK with it, because I at least should mention it and it's a personal essay anyway: sin. Sin is not popular for good reason, it's a term that's been used out of context to hurt people, and it's something that many of you have had used as a cudgel against you – I get that. But there are lots of types of sin, and one of them that may be useful for talking about complicity is the fact that sometimes we are born into webs of meaning that we did not create, but that we still benefit from and participate in. This most clearly seems to me to relate to race – as a white, straight dude I was not here to set up the rules of the game, but I clearly benefit every step of the way from those rules. I hope many of us were angered over the death of Eric Gardner, who was murdered on video tape. I am still angry, because the person who did it got away free and with a pension and the person who filmed it is in jail after being monitored by police and charged with crimes. I can think of no more heinous personal act than what I saw on that video with a man begging for his life, and I hold those officers responsible for getting him a pension – they didn't have to do that but they did. I did not kill Eric Gardner – I am not responsible, but there are plenty of ways that the system of white supremacy that murdered him benefits me. That's the hard stuff we are talking about today. Complicity, not responsibility.

The recent images and discussions that haunt my mind are of children in cages, of border walls and fences, of people who want dignity and are having it denied them. Of cruelty, not the sort of stuff that's a byproduct of policy, but the fact that cruelty is the policy itself. That's what's so disconcerting. Of course, we are unable to be outraged all the time, . We probably were once upon a time complacent with our immigration system, which throughout history has been a tool of violence and oppression, a tool of white supremacy under the guise of American values. We were not always enraged about our systems failures, and don't get me wrong, we should be pissed and ashamed now, but we should also have been pissed and ashamed before.

So how does the spiritual person work out how to think and react to these times? This is not a sermon about how we should mope around, but it's a sermon ostensibly about Ezekiel, a prophet in the Hebrew Bible that was on quite a wild ride, just before an invasion of a foreign occupying force. And God in this part of the Hebrew Bible is telling him what his job is. His job is to be the sentinel of the Hebrew people, and it can be boiled down to: "if you see something, say something." Speak out, and if you don't, if you are silent, then you are to blame.

There is a very insidious desire in today's day and age to sit this one out. That can be very tempting – be neutral or have no opinion. I hope that you will make certain that won't be the case for this community. I want to say that the fantastic work of providing sanctuary to a family here for a long period of time, the work of the peace and justice committee on a variety of issues, and the various ways that Lake Streeters put their

actions where their words are commendable. That's exactly what I feel like we are called to do.

So much of our conversations revolve around responsibility, guilt, and easy black and white morality, but what do we do with complicity? That's a much more difficult question and one that I'm not sure I can help you find an answer to outside of embracing a role as sentinel, of acting locally in pursuit of justice, of calling out evil when you see it so clearly staring you in the face. But the question of complicity will also reveal our moral and ethical fiber in these times. It will show us what we are made of. This is not a time for guilt, but it is a time for deep reflection and then deep action, since that is the only way we can turn complicity into something useful – I speak here of solidarity, of accompaniment, of an acknowledgement that our salvation to use a religious term, or our flourishing to use a more neutral term is bound up with other people's flourishing.

The talk nowadays is around scarcity. For me to win, others have to lose. For there to be more someone must go away with less, and doubtlessly this logic may be true in a few cases, but the central message of scripture that is almost too outrageous to believe is that God's economy is one of abundance, of enough-ness. Of course, I am of the opinion that God is oftentimes weak, as Dorothee Soelle says, because God has no friends. So if we want there to be enough-ness, then that will demand our actions, our prayers, our whole selves to be in a battle to create a society that has enough – whether you were born here or you're a refugee, black or white, poor or rich.

It is not enough to be a sentinel or a referee. You can blow your whistle over and over again and cry foul as much as you like, but the audience for that is small. What you can do is practice abundance in your daily life, show up to fight for people to have a home here, to denounce racism in our public discourse like what happened at this week's rally, and to stake your ground as a religious, ethical person who is here to do the hard work that is required to make this a place worth celebrating again.

The good news? I know you've got it in you. This is Lake Street Church, after all, but I want to encourage you in that work. Don't be immobilized by guilt or complicity, but act in ways that lift up the voices of others, be in solidarity, dare to hope for Revelation's new heaven and a new earth.

And I want to herald some of that new heaven and new earth, because there's an excellent bit of poetry about Eric Gardner that I think announces hope and solidarity and a commitment to sitting with difficult topics, while also drawing attention to those people who are doing such work:

A Small Needful Fact
Is that Eric Garner worked
for some time for the Parks and Rec.
Horticultural Department, which means,
perhaps, that with his very large hands,
perhaps, in all likelihood,

he put gently into the earth
some plants which, most likely,
some of them, in all likelihood,
continue to grow, continue
to do what such plants do, like house
and feed small and necessary creatures,
like being pleasant to touch and smell,
like converting sunlight
into food, like making it easier
for us to breathe.

Complicity, privilege, the death of Eric Gardner, a moon landing commemoration
without Gil Scott Heron: these are all tough things to talk about or think about, but like I
said it's a personal essay, and the real issue at hand is, "what are we going to do about it?"