

## **Can We Hear Now?**

Rev. John Allen

This weekend would have been my 10 year college reunion.

Of course we weren't able to be together in person. But to try to soften the blow a bit several of my classmates posted albums of photos from our time together back then.

Pretty typical stuff, late nights, pranks, photos with our freshman dorm halls, graduation...

A lot my my friends posted lovely reminiscing tributes, inside jokes, and stories that usually began "remember when..."

A little later I came across a different kind of post from one of my classmates. She is black. And it started with a simple question. Take a look at your photo albums, she said. Do you see any black students in them?

I did, and something like scales fell from my eyes.

Because I didn't.

Her post went on to share some raw truth about how challenging it had been to be a black student at Davidson. How the institution was often impenetrable, and unable to hear the concerns of black students.

How programs designed to increase education access for students of color were routinely underfunded and often administrative afterthoughts.

Her post concluded with these words, "Our school was really good at teaching black students how to be around white people. But you all never learned how to be around us."

It is hard for me to confront the ways that racism has played a role in my own life. Much easier to pretend that it is somewhere else, or someone else. Or that racism is old prejudiced attitudes and not subtle systems that reinforce the way things are.

But there it was. The indictment was in my own photo album.

I thought, and spoke, often while I was in college about injustice and prejudice in the world. But never did I pay attention to the way it was a part of my own everyday.

I am sure that this is not new. Yet it was dawning on me in a new way.

I know that those students were telling this story 10 years ago, I know that they were struggling to find supporters, people who would listen to what they were going through, and believe that it mattered.

I couldn't hear. I didn't listen.

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I wanted us to hear the story of Joseph's brothers throwing him into the pit and selling him to the Midianites today largely because of what it lacks.

You may have noticed something odd, that Joseph, who certainly is not shy when it comes to taunting his brothers about his dreams, who certainly seems like he is always able to say what is on his mind, is silent through the whole story.

When they throw him into the pit, no protest.

When they are sitting around eating their lunch, no cries from the depth, no pleading, no asking for help.

And when they pull him up to sell him off for a few bucks, not a word, he just disappears over the horizon in silence.

At every other point in the story before this, and after this, Joseph is never at a loss for words. In fact he has a tendency to go on, and on.

But here. Nothing.

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Years after all this, Joseph's brothers are suffering in the grip of a years long famine.

And in this moment of desperation they are trying to figure out why this calamity has fallen upon their family, what could have caused this suffering.

And finally, all these years later, the brothers return to their memory of that day out in the field.

And this time here is how the story is recorded in the bible. The brothers say to each other: "Surely we are being punished for what we did to our brother. We saw his life in danger and he cried out to us in great distress, but we didn't listen."

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Suddenly now, years later, the true memory floods back into the brothers minds. And we, the readers encounter it for the first time.

Of course Joseph was not silent when he was thrown into a pit and left for dead.

Of course he didn't timidly accept his fate as the traders marched him off to Egypt.

He cried out. In great distress.

But we didn't listen. Scripture puts us in with the brothers. Our ears are deaf to his cries just like theirs.

Until years later... and we are left to say. "of course."

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I am sitting this week, with that discomforting and convicting reality.

I didn't listen. We didn't listen.

Not one message that has been put before our nation these past weeks is new. Black American have literally been dying to have this message heard.

It feels to me like we are emerging from a profound collective deafness, whose grip was tenacious, and yet on the other side, so many of us are left to say. "Of course"

To feel ashamed of what we had not heard. To wonder how we could have ever missed something so plain.

I hope that is what is happening. I really do. I feel like I am fighting every day against a gravity that wants to pull me back into the comfortable silence of before. Where the old photos just made me smile.

And I the best tool I have found in that daily struggle is to keep listening.

To be willing to stand embarrassed before all I had not been able to hear.

To resist the urge to go back.

To continue to listen, even when it makes me uncomfortable.

Because it will never cost me my life to hear what others say.

But it may cost others their lives if we ignore them.

