

White Silence is Violence

Heather Thum-Gerber



My knee is grinding into the sandpaper asphalt. It is high noon and the sun is beating down. Helicopters are buzzing overhead. Cars are diverted to a different road. I am kneeling in the center of the street in front of the Louisville police headquarters with 100 other protesters. We are silent. For 8 minutes and 46 seconds, we hold our stance; the same amount of time George Floyd's neck was forced down by an officer's knee.

On June 11, 2020, I was one of the protesters gathered with Louisville Showing Up for Racial Justice (LSURJ) to end white silence on the topic of racism. Ironically, we chose to be silent to end the silence.

Silence seemed to be the perfect place for us to start that day. Silence has been the narrative for white Americans on racism for decades. It is white silence that has allowed for perpetual income inequality for people of color. It is white silence that has allowed for police brutality to repeatedly turn to murder in black communities. It is white silence that has allowed for systemic racism to thrive in every institution. White silence has fed into it all.

The silence that day of a predominately white group reminds me of a different person's silence. Barely a blip in the Biblical story they are a character so small one might gloss over their verse entirely. It is the centurion standing silently by as Jesus died.

We know nothing of the centurion other than he was standing by watching the three men be executed. In my mind, he was an average person. He was born into a certain status in society, much like we all are, and living life in the best way he knew how. His status granted him certain privileges as well as duties. These qualities do not sound unfamiliar to white Americans today. Which is why the centurion is so relatable.

Just like the centurion stood silently watched Jesus on the cross and white Americans have stood by silently watching as people of color have been crucified.

Fortunately, the biblical story does not end in silence. The centurion proclaims, "Certainly this man was innocent." In the centurion's words, he is calling out injustice.



As I reflect on the demonstration in downtown Louisville, I am reminded of my own silence toward the suffering and oppression experienced by people of color. Much like the centurion I have stood by watching in silence. However, the centurion did not stay in his silence I cannot stay in mine. As the 8 minutes and 46 seconds came to a close it was time for me to proclaim, “Certainly this man was innocent!” It was time to stand up and it was time to be loud. No longer could I kneel idly in the center of the road. No longer could I ignore my surroundings nor block the natural flow of life. We stood up and marched down the street bellowing at the top of our lungs, “What do we want? Justice. When do we want it? Now.” Our silence was broken.

My actions that day I call out to my fellow white Christians, white friends, white acquaintances, and white Americans to stand up and proclaim injustice. Remembering too that the story does not end at the proclamation for resurrection is yet to come.

Heather Thum-Gerber is a graduate student, MDiv 2022 at Louisville Seminary, KY, USA.



This is an information resource in the Anti-racism Digital Library and Thesaurus (ADL&T). You are free to use this material under a Creative Commons 4.0 International license as long you provide proper attribution and share alike (free, no cost). Find similar, other trusted content in *ADL&T* collections such as *The Intercultural Church, Louisville Seminary*, and visit the Anti-racism Digital Library often to learn, grow your anti-racist voice and identity, and join in the movement to end racism.

endracism.info | lpts.edu