

1 Corinthians 15:12-20
"The Faith of the Living"

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There is an old saying that "Those who know, don't speak. While those who speak, don't know." That sounds like good advice, though I don't know where it would leave us if we all took it. I suppose we'd end up sitting around having to decide between the sound of silence and the sound of stupidity. I mean, if those who speak, don't know, who wants to be the first one to stand up and speak? Wouldn't that just mean you're the person who knows nothing, and the last person any of us should trust? We all know what gets said of the person who's always running their mouth: "You can't trust a word they say." Honestly, who wants to be that person?

At the same time, if, therefore, no one ever stood up to speak, how would we ever get anything done? Are there not times when it is necessary to speak? Doesn't scripture say, "For everything there is a season, a time to be born and a time to die, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to keep silence and a time to speak?" The question of course is always, When? When is it time to speak and when is it time to just shut up?

This month is Black History Month and this past week I read once again Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Written in 1963, King was arrested and put in jail for breaking a law that forbid people from parading, demonstrating, boycotting, trespassing, and picketing. King, along with other members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Civil Rights movement, chose to defy the law on the grounds that it was what King called an "unjust law."

"Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority

Now, there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust. [Let us not forget], it was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany." [And this is where we could insert one of those quotes famously attributed to King. "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."]

Sitting in his jail cell, arrested for non-violent protest, King writes his letter as a response to white Christian pastors who would say they agree with him that equal rights ought to be afforded to both whites and blacks, but who do not agree with him on the timing of his protest. "Now is not the time to speak," they say. To them, King writes back to say, then when?

We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our God-given and constitutional rights...Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was "well timed" according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never."

We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men [and women] willing to be coworkers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally *of such hatred*.¹

But I digress, ever so slightly. For this morning, we have heard not from Martin Luther King Jr. in a letter from Birmingham, but from Saint Paul in a letter to Corinth. As far as we can see in reading it, there is nothing in Paul's letter to the church at Corinth about racial discrimination. There is, however, a clear call to unity, which means there must also be a point of division. In the case of Corinth, there is division in the community over many things: the role and authority of women as women; definitions for marriage, and what, if you are married, is and is not legitimate grounds for divorce; food, and what the types of food we eat says about us. Will being a vegetarian bring me closer to God and make God love me more? Can someone really say they care about their body and love God who made them if they only ever eat junk? And, my personal favorite: compensation guidelines for pastors. It's all in there—all this and more. And we can imagine that in this church community in Corinth, people sit around debating the issues, with each side making a good bit of what they know, because when we feel like our position in the world is being questioned or threatened, this is what we do. We reach for power. We get the mighty arm of the law on our side, and we talk a lot about what we know without saying how it is

¹ Italics my variation and addition to the original text.

exactly that we've come to know it. In this way, we can show off what we know while also keeping what we know to ourselves. I've got something you don't have, and if you want it, you'll have to come to *me* to me to get it, and I'll decide if you can have it.

It is one of my favorite things to do, to drive around other parts of our country and to see how the Bible and going to church are viewed differently depending upon where you are. Here in the north, if you were to drive down 95 and see a sign that read: John 3:16, you might think it's some sort of differential equation. If you're in the south, though, you know it's a Bible verse, and you already know, without even having to look it up, what the verse says.

Anyway, a couple weeks ago, while driving through North Carolina on our way to South Carolina, I saw a billboard that had a picture of a monitor, the kind you see in a hospital room that shows your heartbeat. On the billboard, the heartbeat line went up and down, up and down, until it just went flat. Underneath this flat line, were the words: "After you die, you will meet God," and then there was a phone number, written out in big numbers so you could see it while driving by at 75 m.p.h. Call 855-FOR-TRUTH.

I didn't think much of it, until 10 miles later when I saw another billboard. This one had a picture of a newborn baby on it, and underneath the baby, the words: "There is evidence for God," and the same phone number to call.

10 miles more, and another billboard with a picture of a Bible, and the words: "All the GPS you need," followed by that same phone number—855-FOR-TRUTH. I commented to Moira about it. "Do you think the people who put that up there really think truth is as simple as a phone call?" Moira's only comment in return was, "Don't even think about calling them." So, I didn't. Until 2 days ago.

I punched in the numbers and letters on my phone. 855-FOR-TRUT... Huh, I didn't need all the letters in the word truth to make the call. I wondered if the people who set this phone number up knew this. That in order to get to the truth, we probably don't need to require as much as we do.

An automated voice picked up. "Welcome to Gospel Billboards! To hear more about our billboard messages, listen carefully to the following recording. For "Will you spend eternity in heaven or hell," press 1. For "There is evidence for God," press 2. For "Jesus is the only way," press 3. For "After you die, you will meet God," press 4." I pressed 4.

Another automated voice came on to read several Bible verses, and then to tell me, “Did you know that God so loved the world?”

“Yes,” I said into the phone, like I was answering a question, and depending upon how I answered the question, I’d keep going or I’d have to go back to the main menu. But the voice just kept on talking. “And did you know that salvation is a free gift from God?”

“Yes!” I was getting into this.

“But we must meet the conditions for receiving it.” Wait. What? How can it be free if it has conditions? That doesn’t make any sense. I wanted to know, what are the conditions? I stayed on the line and kept listening, but the call just ended. Honestly, I wasn’t suddenly afraid for my salvation, like it was out there on the other end of a line somewhere—a lost connection. I was more, mad, like my call had been dropped because they already knew I didn’t meet the conditions, but no one was going to tell me what the conditions are.

I think it’s worth noting that when Saint Paul writes his letter to the church at Corinth—a church deeply divided by opinions on any number of issues—he ultimately goes for the throat and brings up the resurrection of Jesus. “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ hasn’t been raised, and if Christ hasn’t been raised, then what have we been doing this whole time saying that he has? Are we liars? Is our faith a sham?” I mean, this is bedrock material. We can disagree on a whole host of other issues, but we have an entire day dedicated to resurrection. We buy whole outfits just for the occasion. Some of us never show up to church except on Easter. And yet, Jesus himself never seems to show up on that day. Has he been raised from the dead? Is there really such a thing as life on the other side? We can’t be wrong on this one.

The catch of course, and Paul knows this, is that he doesn’t know. He can’t prove the resurrection, and there’s no 800 number he can call up. Which means, there are also no conditions for believing in it. Anyone can do it. Is there life on the other side of death?

This past week I heard a story, as told on *CBS Morning Edition*, about a neighborhood just up the road from here in Newton, Massachusetts. The story was about a little girl named Sam who was born deaf. She can’t hear a thing, but she can see just perfectly. And whenever she is out on a walk in her neighborhood with her mother and

sees anyone, Sam waves and says hello in sign language, but the neighbor doesn't know what to say back. "I didn't know what to say back. Wouldn't you like to be able to talk to her?" said one neighbor who was interviewed on the program. "To let her know that she belongs in the neighborhood, that you are her friend?" said another. So what did the neighborhood do? They hired a sign language instructor to come to one of their homes one evening a week to teach everyone in the neighborhood—more than 20 people—how to speak in Sam's language. Now, whenever a neighbor sees Sam out and about, they sign hello, and the first thing Sam signs back is, "Friend." "It's quite beautiful," says Sam's mom. "Our daughter is coming alive even more, and we didn't think that was possible."

Is there really such a thing as resurrection from the dead? Show me something I've never seen before and I'll believe, I hear some say. And I want to say, believe, and I'll show you things you've never seen before. Amen.