

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

Today, with his death now 57 years in the past, I worry that we slide further and further toward that shallow understanding trap.

We see this when schools hang posters or call a day off without context, or follow the increasingly popular trend of scheduling teacher in-services on unrelated topics, checking the box of respecting a federal holiday without losing a day of modern educational productivity.

If you want to take it a step further, Google "MLK Day Sales" and see which retailers just happen to schedule major, usually unnamed sales events for this particular holiday weekend, capitalizing on our availability without daring to own the exploitation therein.

As we celebrate his life tomorrow, we have a call not only to recognize Dr. King's leadership and call to justice, but to recommit ourselves to confronting injustice in our world. Eliminating injustice is not a liberal, politically motivated social agenda, but core to our faith as followers of Christ.

After all, as the Rev. Dr. Brenda Salter McNeil points out, it's an indictment on the church that so many Christians don't know that the gospel includes reconciliation across racial, gender, ethnic, social and cultural barriers. We are called to make disciples, says McNeil,

who create social change as part of a new community that loves the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loves our neighbors as ourselves.

While that is a simple, bold, and arguably apolitical call that no doubt resonates in the hearts and minds of this sanctuary, speaking up can be hard. I can only speak for myself, and will not generalize about the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic nor historical background of anyone else in this congregation.

My geographic location, day to day life, and tendency to prefer complacency over the risk of accidentally offending anyone are barriers to confronting injustice, identified as the paralysis of privilege. Thoughts like:

“What if I’m misunderstood”

“I don’t want to seem too political”

“I don’t want to sound condescending”

Or...an internal struggle with the very concept of privilege. I grew up close to poverty, a socioeconomic outcast in a wealthy community in which the few childhood friends I had were not allowed to come to my house because of the holes in our ceiling and cars in the driveway.

My ancestors were Russian Jewish and Irish immigrants who came to Brooklyn and Philadelphia to escape persecution and encountered hostility.

While historically, the color of my skin might miscommunicate my own ancestry and experience, at the end of the day, privilege can be defined as having the freedom to choose or not choose certain actions, with little to no personal repercussions for those choices.

That now applies to me, and it’s something I must own, recognize and adapt to.

I'm called back to one of the first times I stumbled into being aware of my own privilege. I want to be clear that I am not the hero of this story.

In July of 2002, I was working as a program director at an outdoor education center in Western Massachusetts. We served a population of New York City public school children who engaged in science programming on our forested campus for three days during the school year, and those who felt a connection to the land and the experience were encouraged to return for three weeks during the summer, for a nearly-free outdoor expedition-based program.

To avoid the inherent challenges of white do-gooders attempting to convince city kids that a better life could be found in the woods, this organization did everything in its power to recruit staff from within, training former participants in all areas of camp operations and leadership. At camp, I was in the vast minority - an outsider who had not yet lived in New York, but was hired anyway for my outdoor leadership skill, and proclaimed belief that the outdoors were for everyone.

One evening, a group of four of us drove down to North Adams to do kitchen laundry and reconnect with the outside world.

Paul was an 18 year old former student and youth trip leader who had come back up to get us out of a jam when our local cook quit, and get himself further away from a culture of violence that he detested.

Tajeme was the glue holding our program together that summer. He was doing a little bit of everything...teaching, kitchen work, maintenance work, taking a break between gigs as a carpenter and artist in Brooklyn. He was born in Jamaica, and stood 6 1/2 feet tall, with long dreads tucked under a knit cap. His constant gentle wisdom carried us all through a tough summer of personnel and logistic challenges.

Finally, Anthony was the kid of the group. A 17 year old youth leader in between Long Trail trips, just looking for a dose of civilization.

With the laundry done, Anthony and Paul went to check email, and Tajeme and I settled into a local bar for a beer.

We were shortly interrupted by a frantic Anthony, who got as far as “Paul’s in trouble”, and pointed in a general direction before he was even inside. As we quickly paid for our drinks, we learned that Paul had inexplicably decided to urinate in the first dark corner he found, which was the door of a long-abandoned yet historic theater that the city recently had purchased, with just enough money left over to re-light the marquee, while awaiting funds for future restoration.

In a city struggling with tension between New England post-industrial job loss and a newly burgeoning arts community, the theater and its historic marquee was a rare source of common ground,

and our kitchen assistant was now peeing on it.

Anthony also let us know that Paul had a bag of weed in his pocket, before running back to the camp van.

Tajeme and I walked past the theater, and it was the epicenter of police activity. We originally planned to let Paul stand on his own, until we saw the officers donning thick nitrile gloves and considered the contents of his pocket, and what a marijuana conviction in 2002 might look like for a young Latino man, dressed in a white tank top and Puerto Rican flag bandana, who happened to be defiling the pride of the town.

“This could mess up his whole life”, said Tajeme quietly, followed by “you’re the acting camp director, all yours. Now I’m out of here before they get a closer look at me and bring me into this mess”.

Not knowing what else to do, I stepped forward, found the officer with the most stripes, and haltingly started with “Hi, I’m David. I work at the Manice Education Center, and it looks like one of my staff members might be in trouble”.

It was Paul who responded, by this point handcuffed and sitting on the curb. “Get out of here. I don’t need you trying to speak for me, I can handle myself”.

At that point, a crash course in privilege made visible, Tajeme spoke up for me, calling out from across the street:

“I don’t like it either, but this started with what you chose to do. His privilege is BS, but it’s the least of your worries right now”. Then, just as he promised, he was gone...headed back to the van to look after Anthony.

It worked. The sergeant looked over at Paul, and told me “I don’t know much about what goes on at that camp up there, but your kid got lucky. Get him back up the hill, and don’t bring him back”.

At that moment, I fought every desire to educate him as to exactly what went on at *that* camp, and walked silently back to the van, with Paul just far enough ahead of me to not need to say a word.

Most of us weren’t completely right or wrong. I had never considered the impact of my own privilege, nor the work that I had not done to build a more trusting relationship with Paul ahead of time, in which the content of our character rose to the surface over the color of our skin. I assumed he knew my intention, not realizing what it is to grow up in an environment of systemic injustice that gave every reason to believe the exact opposite. The police were rightly upset at the act that had occurred. Paul’s mistake was obvious, having nothing to do with his ethnicity, and everything to do with teenage impulsivity.

I lost touch with Tajeme, yet was uncomfortable telling this story without his perspective, so I looked him up to reach out. It was a stark reminder of the injustice still left to address.

I discovered that Tajeme, Jamaican-born son of revolutionary poet and musician Everton Sylvester, an accomplished carpenter, poet, activist, and artist and visual artist in his own right, one of the kindest and most genuine people I have ever known, had become a simple statistic in early 2011. 10 days into the new year, he was New York City's seventh homicide victim.

Tajeme Sylvester had no history of disputes or legal trouble. His interests included environmentalism and holistic health, and in his last social media update, he wrote that he was full of wanderlust, daring...believing in dreaming out loud.

He was shot in the evening while working alone as a carpenter at a cooperatively run gallery in Brooklyn offering workshops, holistic teachings, spiritual council. He was murdered while creating a space for artists, travelers and visionaries like himself to thrive.

The true injustice is that, in a nation that claims equality under the law, and in the eyes of God, Tajeme Sylvester's murder remains unsolved.

Compare this to the recent shooting of a CEO on the same city's streets. There was no \$60,000 tax-funded reward for Tajeme's killer, no nationwide manhunt, no arrest made in a rural McDonalds 300 miles away.

This story is all too familiar to us. A carpenter of color in his early 30s murdered while doing the work of his heart and soul with nobody to keep watch, even for one hour.

When we can find no justice to give and mercy seems unlikely, then all we have left is God's grace. Within that grace, may we be forgiven, and from that forgiveness, we are called to speak up. Again and again. Until true discipleship surrounds us.

We might stumble, we might not know our place, yet that does not absolve us of our responsibility.

Until the bank of justice is no longer bankrupt.

Until the color of our skin does not determine the treatment we receive, in life or in death.

Until we can proudly assert that in Dr King's words, the jangling discords of our nation are indeed transformed into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood,

We have work to do.

God, do we have work to do.