The Question of: Divine Silence

Friends,
Lots has happened this week.
There have been funerals for those killed in Charleston.
There has been a Supreme Court ruling upholding health insurance.
There has been a Supreme Court ruling granting marriage equality in all 50 states.
There is celebration and there is mourning.

And, my topic today is the question of divine silence.

A topic that makes me think I really should just sit down and be silent myself.
However and perhaps against my better judgment, I will continue.
Thought you might also wish in a few minutes that I had remained silent.

Some of us hate silence.
Some of us crave it.
Complete silence is very difficult to achieve these days.
There always seems to be the background or ambient noises of the refrigerator,
the computer that's asleep or the low-grade hum of lights.

Even social media - like FB or Twitter - which are flat, no volume media unless
you add a video
seem to erupt with noise
as they did this week over the Supreme Court rulings.

Did you know that even your body can not be truly silent?
Composer John Cage spent time in a room without echoes-
an anechoic chamber.
Mr. Cage hears pitches perfectly and in the chamber he heard one high and one low pitch.
He was told that the high pitch was his nervous system operating
and the low pitch was his blood circulating.¹
Fascinating isn’t it!!

Sometimes silence, or relative silence, is peaceful and soothing.
Like the contentment of just sitting with a friend or beloved and
not needing to say anything.
Or the silence of sitting by a lake and only hearing the birds, crickets and
other nature sounds.

Sometimes silence is not peaceful or soothing,
but injurious and painful.
Like the “silent treatment” during an argument.
Or the silence of the house endured in grief after
the death of your beloved of 5, 15 or 55 years.

And, then there’s the question of divine silence.

Divine silence is one of the loneliest, harshest silences we experience.

Maybe you’ve had 12 long years of
praying for healing and you found silence.
Maybe you’ve cried out to Jesus to save your baby, and got silence.
Maybe you’ve stood over your beloved and wept, why?
And the silence was deafening in the
days, weeks and months after their death.
Maybe since Charleston, since Ferguson,
New York, Texas and others, you’ve cried out why and — — — —
silence.
Maybe you’ve experienced the hatred and pain of
racism and were met with divine silence.

In our gospel reading today,
There were crowds of people hoping to be healed.

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown. When God is Silent. 1998. p. 45-46
But the story doesn’t end, \textit{and all were healed}. Was God silent then?

The Wisdom reading says, 
\textit{God did not make death,}
\textit{and he does not delight in the death of the living.}
Then why did the Charleston 9 die?  
Why did the little ones of Newtown and their teachers die?  
And why was God silent?

When there are no answers to tragedy, trauma and despair.  
No words from God, no healing, no justice, God seems silent.

In the beginning was the Word. 
And the Word was with God.

Into the chaos, God spoke, 
and the heavens and earth came to be.  
Stars and moon, plants and animals  
spoken into existence by God.  
Finally humans were spoken into being.  
And, to humans God gave the gift of language 
and the gift of companionship and  
Thus began a long conversation between God and humans.

God spoke to man and woman in the garden.  
When they were driven out of the garden,  
God continued to speak with the people.  
God made promises to Abraham and Abraham bargained with God.  
God spoke to Moses and the people were freed, wandered the wilderness,  
received the Commandments and journeyed to the Promised Land.  
Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Jonah received  
God’s words and brought them, however unwillingly at times, to the people.

God and Job’s conversation is one of my favorites.  
Job talks a lot.
Then Job’s friends start talking a lot.  
But God stays silent.  
For chapter after chapter God is silent.  
Into that silence, Job’s friends started talking.  
Many words filled the air and found their way to God.  
The friends’ words were wrong.  
Job maintains his innocence and demand for God to answer.  
Finally, God speaks and we are reminded of  
God’s power to create,  
God’s commitment to life,  

After the early fathers and mothers, Job and the prophets,  
God spoke in the person of Jesus.  

The gospel today is a story within a story.  
A religious leader asks Jesus to save his daughter.  
A woman needs healing.  
Jesus responds to them both.  
And there was enough of Jesus,  
enough divinity to for both.  

Their lives are intertwined.  
That’s sort of how life is.  

On June 17th, the story within a story was that members of  
Emmanuel AME gathered for a Bible study and  
welcomed a stranger in their midst.  
At the end of an hour, the stranger acted with racist hatred and  
killed 9 members, saying horrible things as he did.  
And, not 48 hours later, family members spoke forgiveness to the one who  
killed their family.  

This week the Supreme Court ruled in favor of marriage equality  
on the same day that Emmanuel AME held the funeral for pastor,  
statesman and Southern ELCA Seminary graduate, Clementa Pinckney.
Our lives are story within story.
Love between 2 men and 2 women is linked with racial justice.
Our lives are story within story always.
Created in God’s image our story is always within God’s story.

Yet, God seems to be silent at times.
Usually we interpret a divine silence as God’s absence,
as a God who doesn’t care,
or as a punishment
or at the least as a ‘no’ answer to our prayers.
Are these the only possibilities?

Is there a way divine silence can be positive?
I think so.

Remember Jobs friends?
They got it right early in the story.
At first they were silent.
They simply sat with Job.

I believe God does that, too.
God sits with us when we grieve,
when we rage at injustice or suffering.
I believe God sits with us,
cries with us, and
sends love and care.

We are called to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world.
We know from the gospels and from the letters of the New Testament
that Jesus didn’t leave us alone in this world.
There is the Spirit, the one that comes along side of us.
That speaks for us, prayers for us when we don’t have words.
The Spirit that moves us to action.

God’s silence offers us the opportunity to step into the breach
to be the hands and feet, the heart, the love of God to one another.
I believe we are at a critical time in this country. As Jim Wallis, Founder of Sojourners wrote:

It is painfully true that in our time, in this year, in the United States, there is still no safe space for black people in America — even in their own churches.
Racism is America’s original sin. It expresses itself explicitly and overtly in what we horribly saw last week in a black church, but racism continues on, implicitly and covertly, in American institutions and culture.

The sin of racism was very much alive at Mother Emanuel that horrible night. But it lingers and lives on in so many systemic ways throughout American life.²

These and other racially motivated killings demand action.

Will we remain silent? Or will we step into the breach? Will we engage in discussion and action.

If our lives really are stories within stories, then today, we, white people, in a largely white church are called to be allies of our black brothers and sisters.

And, I pray that they will have us.

Called to walk with one another so that Love Truly Wins and racial equality is achieved.

Friends, Jesus honored the lives of people.

² - See more at: http://sojo.net/articles/charleston-testing-soul-america#sthash.MR1kRx37.dpuf
He engaged with everyone, even if he disagreed with them. He prayed with them. Probably even sat silently with them. He accompanied the people of God through storms and crowds, cast out demons and defeated evil.

In our accompaniment, let us be careful that our actions do not make enemies of one another, that we do not drive out love and humility.

As we seek a way forward, let us remember the Spirit speaks for us when we do not have the words ourselves. Let us remember that the hand of the Lord provides all that we need.

Come to the table. Receive the body and blood of the one who shows us the way. Amen.