



**“Is Silence Golden?”**

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**Scripture: Exodus 17: 1-6, Philippians 2: 3-8, Matthew 21: 23, 28-31**

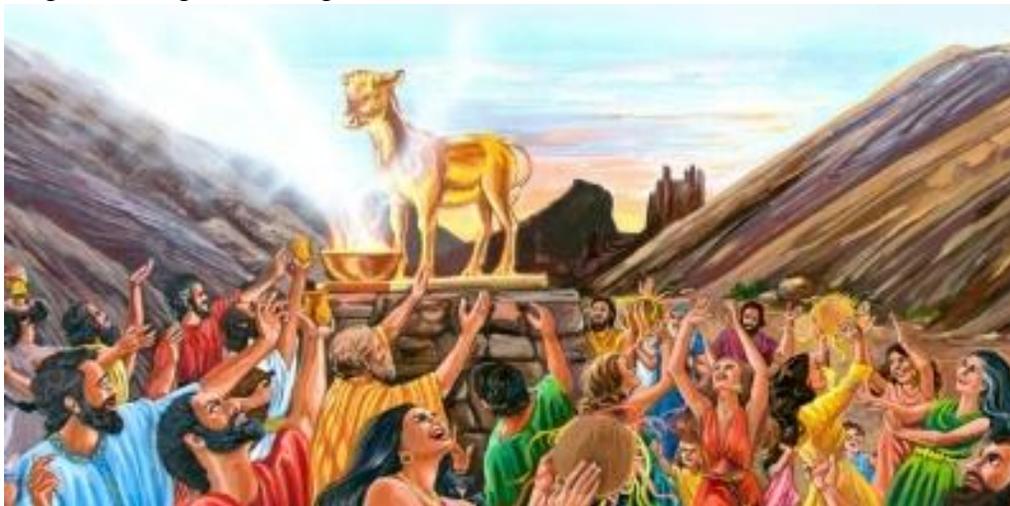
That’s a powerful, harsh warning Jesus gives to the church elders. And in another time and another tradition, your minister might spend the next 20 minutes warning you that YOU, like those church elders, are in the back of the line leading “into the kingdom of God.”

But Jesus didn’t teach us to judge. Theologian Dr. Amy Jill Levine<sup>1</sup> reminds us, Jesus didn’t say, “What Jody says from the pulpit is THE WAY.” No. Jesus says, “I AM THE WAY.” So my job is to read scripture and dig deep and ask the hard questions like, “In this reading, are we the church elders? Or the tax collectors and the prostitutes? Or a little of both?” My call is to lift up for you the way of God’s love and forgiveness and to examine how scripture teaches us to do a better job following Jesus. So rather than bracing in your pew for an onslaught of condemnation this morning, I invite you to lean forward and listen for hope and truth and the way to follow in Christ’s footsteps.

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Silence Is Golden. It’s a well-worn adage I learned as a child. In other words, “Hush up. Behave. Be quiet and fit in.”

But lately I’ve been wondering, “Is silence golden?” [And is golden even good? There are people caught dancing around a golden calf in Exodus that would tell us otherwise.]



Is silence golden? Raise your hand if you agree. Raise your hand if you disagree. People, hear the good news! You're all correct! Is silence golden? Well . . . sometimes. It depends on what is coming out of your mouth. And perhaps more importantly what is coming out of the mouths of others.



You remember that kid from the bus. I'll bet you even remember the kid's name—for me, it's Thomas. That kid that climbs up the steps of the bus with his backpack weighing down one shoulder and a huge chip weighing down his other shoulder. You slide down, melting into your seat to avoid his gaze. He thumps the top of your seat on his way to the back row. You hear him laughing with a few of his snickering buddies, and you shiver

knowing he can pivot from laughter to threat in an instant. After the bus screeches to a stop on your street, you run because his expertise is in intimidation. You don't feel safe until your feet finally hit your own front porch.

Or maybe it's high schoolers Julia and Susan, the leaders of the popular girls, whose cold staring eyes warn you not to pause on "their corner" of the hallway before class. Their expertise is in exclusion, making sure you are aware they are in on the joke or invited to the party, and you aren't.



According to Merriam Webster's Dictionary, a bully is "one who is habitually cruel, insulting, or threatening to others who are weaker, smaller, or in some way vulnerable."<sup>iii</sup> A bully trades in the currency of humiliation. He shouts you down, gaslights you, makes you question whether you can do anything right. She makes you wonder if your existence even matters in this world.

The Bible contains many descriptions of bullying. This morning we heard Old Testament bullies gaslighting Moses, shouting "Did you bring us here so we can die of thirst? Give us water!" We also heard Paul warn the New Testament bullies in Philippi against exploiting power. He makes

clear their criticism and posturing are not Christ-like. His instruction is, “Christ humbled himself. Do likewise.”

Sadly, some bullies never grow up. Adult bullies do harm physically, mentally and emotionally. Some bullies are like a Chia pet: add alcohol and the nastiness grows, as insecurities overpower any sense of civility. They will bully anyone in sight: an opposing team’s fan, a spouse or their own child.



This is a photo of Liu, a smart, polite, diminutive Chinese woman who lives in Tokyo. Married to an American Jewish man and mother to three children, she’s a trained architect who has designed large public buildings and now works in finance for an American company. She’s pretty amazing. And she’s recently been the target of a bully.

As I described Liu, did your ears pick up on her exposed underbelly of easy targets a bully would identify? Small. Smart. Jewish. Female. Chinese in Japan. Liu has many qualities that are different than the cultural norm, that make her “other.”

Liu shook her head as she described to me her first few years with the finance company. The boss didn’t lumber up the steps of the bus with a chip on her shoulder. She hid her giant chip, constructed of solid insecurity, under an Armani jacket. Liu’s boss would say to the work team, “Let’s all go get lunch and talk through the finer points of this project.” And as Liu would rise and tuck her purse under her arm, the boss would smile—in a Cruella Deville/Meryl Streep *The Devil Wears Prada* sort of way—and say, “Oh Liu, you don’t need to go. Why don’t you stay here and get some other work done.”



A bully is simply a mean outward expression of insecurity. The bully is unsure of his power and political might. The bus bully is likely insecure about his academic status at school. The high school bully is insecure about her popularity. Liu's boss was insecure in her job status. Bullies ran The Inquisition, beheaded kings and queens, launched crusades, and even now plant bombs all in the name of God. (God who, incarnate in Jesus Christ said, "Blessed are the merciful. Let the little children come to me. My peace I give you.")

And so now we turn to the type of bully that should never exist; yet this archetype has persisted steadily since 30 A.D. The Christian bully. Some bullies' insecurities lie in their faith and their relationship with God. We see them on the national stage in their own kind of bully pulpits. They're the people who say, "I am in and unless you are like me, you are OUT. This is MY faith. This is MY Bible. I decide how to interpret the fine print and you—you just don't fit in.



This hijack of Christianity is a pervasive, insidious disease. People who didn't grow up learning about Jesus see hypocrisy when they see so-called Christians speaking and acting in cruel, bullying manners. A recent study by Barna<sup>iii</sup> asked questions about the attitudes and actions of North American Christians. The survey revealed that 51% of North American Christians polled possess attitudes and actions more like the Pharisees than like Christ. In other words, most Christians were described as self-righteous and hypocritical. Sadly, only 14% of Christians surveyed reflected the attitudes and actions that resembled Christ."

As Christians we are called to spread the good news to be found in Jesus Christ and exclusion, isolation and judgment are not the good news. And the problem goes beyond what we say and leaks into what we do—or don't—do.

In Matthew's gospel, Christ asked about the sons of the vineyard owner, "Which son did his father's wishes?" Was it the one who said he'd do the work? Or the one who actually DID the work? The one who pounds the pulpit and says, "Tithe to your church!" and then climbs aboard his private jet or the one who is-- at this moment --quietly sifting through rubble in Mexico, cleaning out flood rot in Houston, pounding in another nail for a Habitat for Humanity new homeowner?

Christian bullies aren't only on television. They exist in local congregations as well. I've known them in both tiny and large churches. Bullies often rise to power during a time of change. They feel unsettled when someone new suggests trying something different rather than "the way we've always done it."

Our last preacher always stood in the pulpit and preached, and the new minister dares to step out into the center and even walk up and down the steps a few times during the sermon. It's outrageous!

People are saying they're uncomfortable with the new minister's ideas about programming. He's not from this area. Someone should let him know he is handling this wrong.

Who here thinks it's smart to finish a sentence that begins with "I probably shouldn't say this but . . ." Who thinks the good news follows the phrase "People are saying . . ." Nope. In fact, this second phrase may sound familiar because it was used to bully Jesus, to try and trap him. It's the language of bullies.

Silence IS golden. "I probably shouldn't say this but"—then don't. "People are saying"—shhh, hush up. Don't worry. Trust in God. Change can be good. There's no need to bully the new person who is simply trying to lead the church toward Christ.

Yes, silence IS golden. Except when it isn't. Sometimes being quiet, especially in the presence of a bully, is not neutral but harmful.



Bishop Desmond Tutu wisely observed, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality."

Dave Fry wisely preaches that to make a difference as a Christian in this world, show some grace to someone who needs it. Dave's call for small interactions of grace echoes the words many attribute to St. Francis: "Preach the gospel. If necessary, use words."

I'm suggesting an additional way to make a difference as a Christian in this world. Remain silent when it's the Christ-like thing to do. And also, speak up when it's the Christ-like thing to do.

Write a letter to the editor that says, "That self-proclaimed Christian who says he speaks for all in our faith does not speak for me." When a co-worker disparages another co-worker, find your voice. A simple, "You're not suggesting Lazhar is less than us because he is Muslim?" should work fine.

And if you hear in the halls of this very church the phrase, "You know, people are saying . . ." just ask, "Who is saying that? And do we want that person's issue with change to define who we are as members of this church? As we strive daily to follow Christ?"

The person standing in this pulpit is not God's judge. Nor are church members or the guy with the perfect hair on tv. Christ is the judge.

We are not THE WAY. Christ is THE WAY. Let's shut down the bullies by remaining silent . . . or by speaking up.

Silence is golden. Except when it isn't.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Dr. Amy Jill Levine, TheoEd keynote, First Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, September 24, 2017.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bully>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/christians-more-like-jesus-or-pharisees/>