Remarks on the Most Recent Racist Outburst by the President of the United States

Ken Wilson, Jan 14, 2018

We don’t feel a need to comment at church every time something outrageous happens. But tomorrow we commemorate the life and ministry of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. We can’t let this day pass without comment on the most recent racist outburst by the President of the United States—in the Oval Office to a group of lawmakers discussing immigration.

I’m wearing a pin today with a quote from the good reverend: “In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.” Many of us know exactly what that means.

If we’re African-American we wonder how our white friends handle it when they are home for the holidays and Uncle Harry makes remarks like the President did. We have the moms of LGBTQ kids who watch our services online because they’ve lost their local church homes. Too many of their church friends were silent in the face of harm done to their kids by religious discrimination. This silence breaks their hearts and the bonds of friendship. We applaud you momma bears for not putting up with it. You incurred social disapproval for the sake of your kids.

When the President had his racist outburst in the oval office—and it needs to be named—there were two kinds of responses. Most remained silent in the moment. Senators Cotton and Perdue released a statement saying, “we do not recall the President saying those comments specifically.” Perhaps it would not be cynical or even ungenerous to say this statement is more likely an example of cagey silence than candid recollection.

By contrast, yesterday I read the New York Times account of that meeting: “It was just after President Trump had finished railing in the Oval Office against African immigrants he said came from [I won’t repeat the vulgar characterization of Haiti and Africa] when a senior Republican Senator, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, who was there to negotiate a deal on immigration, spoke up.
“America is an idea, not a race,” Mr. Graham said, according to three people familiar with the exchange on Thursday. Diversity was a strength he said, not a weakness. And by the way, the Senator added, he himself was a descendant of immigrants who came to the United States from “s--hole countries with no skills.”

Offer three things by way of individual response, especially if you were not directly impacted by virtue of Haitian or African ancestry.

1. Make a financial contribution to BLM or NAACP, Southern Poverty Law Center, Spellman or Morehouse College, Howard University, or subscribe to Michigan Chronicle. Maybe include a note that you are ashamed of the President’s remarks.

2. Increase your engagement in holding our elected officials accountable—that’s our job as citizens.

3. In honor of Dr. King, resolve to say something the next time you hear bigoted remarks in your circles of connection: family/co-workers/people around you. The speaking up that matters most is the speaking up that costs you something. Doesn’t have to be eloquent or snappy. Just blurt something out: “Uncle Harry, I’m sorry, that’s not OK, I don’t want to hear that.”

“In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies but the silence of our friends.” Let’s resolve to not be among the silent friends.