

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: April 17, 2011 – PALM SUNDAY  
Sermon Title: Keeping the Stones Silent  
Scripture: Luke 19:29-40  
Pastor: Rev. Alida Ward

When I was thirteen years old, Elizabeth Taylor came to town. All the recent memorializing about this legendary woman, all the reminiscences of the spell that her beauty cast, all of that brought flooding back my memories of the day Elizabeth Taylor came to town. I know it may be slightly blasphemous to mention this, but there are actually other Dogwood Festivals out there. And in Charlottesville, Virginia, my hometown, the Dogwood Festival was - -and is - held every April.

As a kid growing up there, it would be hard for me to overstate the excitement with which we anticipated the Dogwood Festival. We knew there would be amusement rides at McIntyre Park, where we could ride the Tilt a Whirl 'til we got sick, and we did. We knew there'd be fireworks, and it wasn't even the fourth of July. And best of all, we knew there'd be the Dogwood Parade, in which half the town marched, and the other half watched. The grand marshal of the parade was usually our Congressman, or the mayor again, but in 1977 the Grand marshal of the parade was .... *Elizabeth Taylor*.

How'd we get so lucky? Well, she'd just married John Warner, and he was hoping to be Senator the next year, so Elizabeth, bless her heart, agreed to be our grand marshal. This was better than the Tilt A Whirl and the fireworks combined. My friends and I, freshmen in high school, had never seen anyone famous before, and we were giddy with anticipation. My mom was pretty giddy too. At the break of dawn, we headed to the parade route, sat ourselves down and waited.

And there she came. Sitting perched on the back of a white convertible, with the Town Sherriff sitting next to her - best day of HIS life -- she was wearing a white dress with dogwoods on it, and elegant - oh so elegant - smiling gamely at us and waving the royal wave. As well she should - she seemed like royalty to us. And the crowds went wild. A movie star so close you could touch her - if you ran wildly into the street and got past Sherriff Bailey, that is - - and not just any movie star -- Elizabeth Taylor, right there on Main Street.

Looking back, I've often wondered what she was thinking. A woman used to the red carpet ends up in some town's Dogwood Parade, sitting next to the Sherriff, who, by the way, puffed on his customary cigar the whole way. Surely she

must have been wondering how the heck this had happened. Surely she must have been pondering just how many more parades she was going to have to ride in to get her husband elected. Or maybe, maybe she was just enjoying the moment. Delighting in the adoring crowds. God bless her, she surely acted like she was.

I wonder what Jesus was thinking, riding into Jerusalem in *his* little parade. No white convertible, of course, just the back of a donkey, the sign of humility that he'd requested. But the crowds were just as excited to see *him*, well, probably even more – this wasn't just a movie star, this was, they hoped, the Messiah ... salvation come to town. And what was he thinking? That what lay ahead would be oh so hard? That things were about to turn? because of course, they were. Or maybe – maybe he too was just enjoying the moment. Delighting in the crowds.

And the crowds were crazed. They were exuberant, joyful, and loud. Really, really loud – So loud that the police showed up. Or rather, the Pharisees – the ever-grumpy religious leaders who didn't care for all this commotion. With their hands over their ears, they hollered at Jesus, "Tell your followers to cut it out! Tell your disciples to shut **up!**" And then Jesus says this, and I like to think that he said it with a big grin on his face: "I'll tell you – if these people were silenced, the stones would shout out." If my followers are silenced, he said, the stones themselves will shout out. If my disciples stop shouting the good news, if my disciples stop telling out the good news, then the stones themselves will start hollering.

So what does that mean for us? Disciples of Christ, two thousand years later? What does that mean for us? It means our job is to keep the stones silent. Our job is to be as loud and joyful and as obvious about who Christ is as those disciples were. And our job is to be as courageous as they were, too, because it was gutsy as heck to be shouting in Jerusalem that you'd found the Messiah. Our job is to be loud and to be courageous. Our job is to keep the stones silent.

So what do I mean? What do I mean about being a loud Christian? Well, the scripture says that what those followers were doing was "praising God joyfully for all the deeds of power they had seen." They were telling the story. They were proclaiming that Love had come to town, they'd seen it, they knew it, they believed it. So for us to keep the stones silent, we have to be willing to let people know that we've seen Love, we know it, we believe it. We need to be a little louder about telling the story.

This past week in our youth groups, I've been sharing a couple videos of interviews with Bethany Hamilton. Who's that? Well, you might have seen the trailer for a new movie called Soul Surfer – maybe you've even seen the movie. Bethany Hamilton was – is – a gifted, fearless, exuberant surfer who at the age of 13 was attacked by a shark – her left arm was bitten clean off. She was back out surfing in less than a month, and didn't stop until she was back to being a formidable competitive surfer. But what you wouldn't know just from catching

the trailer is that she is a young lady of formidable faith, too. Here's what she said, what I've been sharing with the youth groups: How did you get through it, someone asked her. I guess my faith in Jesus Christ is what kept me going day by day. I just trusted in him and I believe that he's the one who gives me the strength and ability to overcome struggles and problems day to day..."<sup>i</sup> And knowing that God loves me and He has a purpose for my life and He wants good to come out of this. For most people they're like, "Well, why would God allow that to happen? It's such a horrible thing." But if you look at all the good that's come out of it, being able to encourage people and reaching more people than I ever could have with two arms ... it's just a creative and different life than it could have been or chosen myself."<sup>ii</sup>

Bethany Hamilon is keeping the stones silent. She's shouting it out, she's letting people know where the strength came from. She could be keeping quiet about her faith, she could be figuring that it's private, not really movie interview material. "If these followers of mine were silenced," Jesus said, "the stones themselves would shout." But Bethany Hamilton's not silent: she is praising God loudly for the healing she's seen, the healing she's known. She's a loud Christian, and she's keeping the stones silent.

Not all of us get the chance for movie interviews as the place to talk about our faith. But there are other ways of being loud, other ways to keep the stones silent. Saint Francis of Assisi famously said "proclaim the gospel always – if necessary, use words." There are ways to proclaim the gospel loudly with our lives, with our deeds.

Yesterday we said goodbye to a woman of this church whose life loudly proclaimed her faith, Amy Lyster, member here for 65 years, alive on this earth for almost 98 years. Amy believed deeply and powerfully in the God of love. And the way she shouted it was through ceaseless compassion, unshakeable hope, constant optimism and an utter inability to be anything but loving to everyone else. We knew her faith. We filled the church to celebrate it – the furnace was out and it was darn cold in here, but we celebrated her faith. Amy, gentle, gracious, classy and good-humored, was by her life a LOUD Christian – she kept the stones silent.

We have to be loud, and we have to be courageous. Those followers of Jesus lining the streets of Jerusalem were pretty darn brave to be there shouting. As they were parading in one gate of the city, Pontius Pilate was coming in another; and proclaiming that Israel had a new Messiah was dangerous talk. The events five days from now remind us of that. So Jesus' followers were not only loud in their proclamation, but they were gutsy as heck too. If we want to keep the stones silent, we're called not just to be loudly faithful but courageously, too.

The other day I ran across a picture again that I'd seen in the New York Times probably a decade ago now, and the picture itself dates back to 1963. The Times has a column they run periodically called "What They Were Thinking",

and in it they print a picture from some place, some time, and tell you what was going through the mind of whoever's in that picture. This particular one showed a young black man on the ground at the edge of a highway, at the edge of a highway in Georgia, 1963. Above him, grinning down at him, but not in any friendly way, are eight white men. It's a chilling picture, because the threat of violence is palpable – and yet the young man is gazing back at the men above him with such strength and courage that you say "who is this?" Who it is is a young man named Winston Lockett, one of ten men, black and white, on the Freedom Walk from Chattanooga to Jackson, Mississippi. And what was he thinking? "Someone had just hit me," he said to the Times reporter, "and I had got knocked down. The men above me in the picture were saying "You're a troublemaker. You're instigating things." So I was telling them sometimes you have to agitate to get the dirt out. You use Tide clothing detergent, you put it inside the machine and you agitate the water if you want clean clothes. ... Was I scared? Certainly I was scared."<sup>iii</sup> Looking at that picture, of a boy just 22 or so, on the ground at the side of the road, all you can think is where did the courage come from to do what he did next? To do what the picture doesn't show us: to stand up from the ground in that circle of hostile men and to brush himself off, and to start walking again, toward the Alabama line? Where did the courage come from to see it through to the end? – and they were beaten again, those men, and jailed. Where else could it have come from than from the One who gives each one of us strength, each one of us courage, each one of us hope? Winston Lockett's courage as a follower of Christ, well it kept the stones silent.

Two weeks ago, and again, this was in a youth group meeting, we talked about bullying. We watched a deeply poignant video made by a middle-schooler at Bedford Middle School in Westport, a video whose appearance on Youtube has prompted the Westport Schools to step up their efforts against bullying, because the cruelty she describes is hard to watch.<sup>iv</sup> And we talked about it here. And one young person in our group said with great honesty, "when you see that happening, you want to do something, you want to speak up, but it's so scary. Those bullying kids have so much *power*." It's not just on a Freedom March that courage is called for from Christ followers. It can be in the halls of a middle school, and for those in the midst of it, it's no less scary. And another young person in the group then told the story of speaking up.

Those young people, searching for courage, finding courage, they are keeping the stones silent. Our courage as adults, in whatever way we are called to show it, our courage should be no less. "If these followers of mine," said Jesus, "if these loud and courageous followers of mine are silenced, then the stones themselves will have to shout."

Our task? Our task is to keep the stones silent. With lives of faithfulness, loud and courage lives of faithfulness, our calling as Christians is to keep the stones silent. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <http://yeticket.com/wp/2011/04/bethany-hamilton-interview-subject-of-the-true-film-soul-surfer/>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://gazettefilmblog.freedomblogging.com/2011/04/07/an-interview-with-soul-surfer-subject-bethany-hamilton-2/5269/>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/26/magazine/the-way-we-live-now-1-26-03-what-they-were-thinking.html>

<sup>iv</sup> “Words are worse than Sticks and Stones,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37\\_ncv79fLA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37_ncv79fLA)