

“Out of the Quiet”

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost - July 18, 2021
Psalm 23 ~ Ephesians 2:11-22 ~ Mark 6:7-13, 30-31

SH-H-H-H-H-H-H! Do you hear that? It’s the sound of silence. And it’s one of the most precious commodities we can claim these days. Even here it’s hard to come by. “Quiet as a church mouse” the saying goes. But call for a moment of silence and someone invariably needs to cough. Or someone has forgotten to silence their cell phone and often the ring tone blares loud and clear.

Silence.... We live in noisy times. I recently saw a bumper sticker that read, “Honk if you love peace and quiet.” Even in our homes we are so unaccustomed to silence that it spooks us. Noise has become such a part of our environment, that the *lack* of noise is what draws our attention ... it makes us feel something must be wrong. We turn on the television or play the radio just for the sense of company. We switch on a fan because its noise will drown out the other noises so we can sleep. We buy noise machines for this purpose which imitate waves at a beach or the brush of a rain on your roof. But there is no machine that can create silence.

Silence ... I think silence scares us. In a world that measures how important you are by how busy you are, silence means nothing is happening and you don’t really matter. But the problem is deeper than that. Whatever we make of the stories of demons in the gospels, those demons are always noisy ... and the sure sign people are healed is when they can sit in silence before Jesus. You know how it is. In those rare moments you get out to the middle of nowhere, turn everything off and sit still, all your inner noisiness surfaces ... the voices of doubt and fear and self-loathing rise and you rush to something noisy to take your mind off of them. We have forgotten how to sit still ... how to be quiet ... how to rest in inner peace.

Silence.... The word “noise” comes from the Latin nausea, which meant seasickness. And it’s a good comparison because noise is making us sick. I found this on the web under “noise pollution:”

Subjected to 45 decibels of noise, the average person cannot sleep. At 120 decibels the ear registers pain, but hearing damage begins at a much lower level, about 85 decibels. The duration of the exposure is also important. There is evidence that among young Americans hearing sensitivity is decreasing year by year because of exposure to noise, including excessively amplified music. Apart from hearing loss, such noise can cause lack of sleep, irritability, heartburn, indigestion, ulcers, high blood pressure, and possibly heart disease. Don’t those side effects sound exactly like the ones we hear on television for every advertised

prescription medicine? But one burst of noise, as from a passing truck, is known to alter endocrine, neurological, and cardiovascular functions in many individuals; prolonged or frequent exposure to such noise tends to make the physiological disturbances chronic. In addition, noise-induced stress creates severe tension in daily living and contributes to mental illness.

We need to rediscover silence for the sake of our physical and mental health. But we need silence for our spiritual health most of all.

Unless we learn to silence the noises beyond us ... and those within us ... we cannot listen. We cannot listen to each other. We cannot listen to our still speaking God.

Silence.... We think too much of prayer as a laundry list of needs we lay before God, the “Cosmic Bellhop,” to use Tillich’s phrase. Or if we are more mature, we think of prayer as beautiful words composed for God’s hearing in order “to lobby in the Divine courts for special favors” as Niebuhr put it. But more than anything else, prayer is coming in silence before God and listening for the still small voice, because what God has to say to us is far more important and needed and beautiful than anything we might say to God.

Silence ... Jesus understood his need for it and ours, too. The Bible is often foreign to us. It comes from a different culture in a distant land in a time long ago. And what could be stranger to our ears and to our way of life than this story about Jesus we are hearing today?

Do you remember our reading from Mark’s gospel just two weeks ago? “Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics” (Mark 6:7-9).

Well, that’s a familiar story. Jesus calls us to do the work he came to do ... to bring God’s healing to the world by bringing God’s love into the world ... to travel light and use our resources to accomplish the mission. And that is still our mission ... our vocation ... our common calling before God. Only the twelve actually answered Jesus’ call.

Mark says: “They went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them” (Mark 6:13). Apparently, this success amazed the disciples themselves. They were genuinely surprised at what God enabled them to do when they were willing to risk ... to attempt great things in the name of Christ. So later, when they returned, Mark says, “the apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught” (Mark 6:30). You can imagine their excitement as they gather and

compare notes with each other. “You won’t believe what we did!” “Oh, that happened to you, too?!” “Wasn’t it amazing?!” “Wasn’t it wonderful?!” And they can’t wait to tell Jesus.

But then comes the strange part ... Jesus responds, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (Mark 6:31). What?! They can’t wait to tell Jesus how special they are ... how successful they’ve been ... what miracles they’ve seen ... what wonders they’ve accomplished. They expect his congratulations ... his celebration ... a big party ... maybe a beach ball to toss around awhile. Or, a management meeting to plan the strategy for their next campaign ... and an immediate return to the work, because, time’s a’wastin’ and there are so many hungry, hurting, demon-tortured souls to save. They expect him ... we expect him ... to say, “Stay at it! Get back to work!” But no, he says. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

Silence was the first thing that Jesus sought. You remember. Right after he was baptized, Mark says, “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him” (Mark 1:13-14). Seeking silence ... Jesus taught it. And he practiced it ... because he needed it. “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” Jesus understood that prayer ... coming to silence before God ... is the beginning point of our mission ... the prelude to all right action ... the source of our sustained, effective engagement for God in the world. In the silence we experience God’s abiding presence. In the silence we receive God’s healing love. In the silence we hear God’s guiding voice. In the silence we find the sustenance that our souls need ... the bread of life ... the ever-flowing fountain that will not run dry. “Be still and know that I am God” urges the psalmist (Psalm 46:10). In the silence we center ourselves in God. And every good word ... every good work ... comes out of the quiet where God holds us.

God built us this way. God founded the Sabbath from the very beginning of creation as a day of rest and re-centering. But what commandment is more ignored in our culture and in the church than God’s call that we should “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” (Ex 20:8)? It’s one of the big ten, you know? Even the Reformers, biblically conservative as they were, recognized that Sabbath-keeping was not about setting rigid restrictions ... but about rest, restoration, and especially quiet ... about finding those times and spaces where we can disconnect ... step off the treadmill ... leave the rat race ... counter the culture ... and seek peace for our souls.

Silence.... “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” We are a busy church. You are a hardworking people. I’ve had folks tell me, “For a congregation your size, the folks in your church do so much for the community.” And that is something for us to

celebrate. Yet we also wrestle with burnout, don't we? We too easily separate our service from our worship ... and forget first and foremost that we are a spiritual community.

I know that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). I realize that worship, prayer, and meditation can become so much spiritual navel gazing ... that it can be narcissistic and self-serving if it does not lead us into action to help others and make this world a better place. We have seen too many churches that were "all talk and no walk," people "so heavenly minded they were of no earthly good." But it is also possible to be so busy ... so active ... that we forget who we are and whose we are and why we are doing what we do. The needs are endless and the work relentless and we become bitter, cynical, angry, dried up souls if we do not reconnect frequently with the One who waits for us in silence.

So! "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." Take a vacation occasionally. Honor your day off. Make worship and meditation and prayer a habit of your heart ... as important to your routine as brushing your teeth. Practice Sabbath. Seek silence. Seek God. And everything else will fall into its proper place.

Silence ... out of the quiet God speaks. Out of the quiet God calls us forward once more, to the good work of our lives. So let's get busy, but remember, God waits for you in silence again up ahead ... and everything you do between now and the day we are together again comes out of the quiet where God holds you close.

May we pray?

Why are you so quiet God, so silent even when we beg for your voice, your action, your intervention? Is it not to teach us to keep silence like you, so that like you our words once spoken will count for much and our actions once taken will be precise, deliberate, and essential? Is it not to lead us to the stillness where we can "let go and let God?" Give us wisdom to follow your example and find the Sabbath spaces we so desperately need. Then let all our words and all our deeds flow from hearts made quiet before you. For Jesus' sake, amen.