

July 13, 2003/Season after Pentecost
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Practicing Silence

Psalm 131 *But I have calmed and quieted my soul....*

Isaiah 30:15 *In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.*

Mark 15:1-5 *But Jesus made no further reply, so that Pilate was amazed.*

This morning I want to talk about silence, which may sound absurd and contradictory. Yet, there is so little silence in and around us that we need to talk about the importance of silence. Then we can begin to reclaim the strength and healing that come from inner quietness, as we read from Isaiah this morning. I recall many discussions about whether or not we actually “hear” God speaking to us. These discussions, I realize now, should really have been about our own capacity for listening to God. God speaks to us all the time, within, among, and around us. The question is whether or not we are practicing the kind of inner quietness that enables us to hear.

Silence, Contemplation, and Self-awareness

We began our worship with Psalm 131, which speaks of calming and quieting our souls and simply being with God. It is a psalm of contemplation, the kind of praying that settles our inner life, lets all the inner noise quiet down, so that we become aware of what is going on in us and around us. Contemplative prayer does not ask God for anything. It does not petition God for this or that. It does not plead for others or ourselves. This kind of prayer seeks only to be aware—of ourselves, of the world, of God.

Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist master, the leader of the Buddhist delegation to the Paris peace talks that ended the Vietnam War. He established a community of practice in France, called Plum Village. Among other works of compassion, Nhat Hanh works to resettle Vietnamese refugees. In political exile from his own country, Nhat Hanh works to help those who are forced to leave Vietnam. Some of them come to Plum Village, where they live until they can re-establish themselves in France or elsewhere.

Nhat Hanh tells the story of Tan Tui, a Vietnamese child who came to Plum Village with her father. While the father was away looking for work, Tan Tui was in Thich Nhat Hanh’s care. One day Tan Tui came in from play for something to drink. Thay—Nhat Hanh’s nickname, meaning “teacher”—poured her a glass of homemade apple juice. Tan Tui saw the juice with the pulp floating around in it and declined to drink it. The rule was that she could not drink something else until she had drunk what was put before her. So out she went to play. Later Tan Tui came back in for a drink and was reminded that she first had to drink the juice. When she looked at the glass, she saw that the apple juice had become clear, the pulp having settled to the bottom of the glass. She asked if this were a different drink, it looked so clear and pleasant to her. Thay explained that it was the same apple juice, but had sat long enough for the pulp to settle so that it became clear. Tan Tui thought deeply for a moment, then said: “It is like you, Uncle Monk, when you sit in meditation.” Nhat Hanh was delighted with this insight and responded that actually he was trying to imitate the apple juice rather than the other way around. In meditation, we sit quietly until everything within us becomes quiet and settled.

When the psalmist says that he has calmed and quieted his soul like a child at its mother's breast, he is saying the same thing. He has learned how to become quiet, settled, and clear in God's presence.

Practicing silence enables us to become aware of the feelings and thoughts, all the inner voices that clamor inside of us, stirring us up and making us anxious. Practicing silence helps us to stop running from those voices, those inner noises. We learn to simply become aware of them, and in awareness, they lose their hold on us and we lose our fear of them. When we do not take time on a regular basis to sit in silence and become aware of our inner life, the swirl of inner voices and feelings controls us, like the invisible strings on a puppet. But when we sit in silence and listen to our inner life, we can learn to become aware of even the most difficult and painful of feelings or memories or thoughts. Then we can simply hold them in our awareness, allowing them to lose their momentum and settle down. Practicing silence in this way is really practicing God's grace with regard to our own lives. Instead of passing judgment on our feelings, we hold them in unconditional acceptance and love. Instead of letting fearful thoughts or memories cause us to reject and divide our inner life, we become aware of them and enfold them in love. After all, as the First Letter of John says, "Perfect love casts out fear."

The more we practice this kind of silence, this kind of contemplative prayer with regard to our own inner life, the greater our understanding and acceptance of ourselves. And in that acceptance is God's own grace and acceptance. We become loving and compassionate toward ourselves when we stop running from ourselves, when we stop to calm and quiet our souls, as the psalmist says. We become clearer, like the apple juice that has sat for a while. This clearness, then, opens us up to the reality of God's presence and love all around us and in us.

Silence and Community

Practicing silence is also important for community, for our relationships with others. For it is actually in silence that we find our deepest connection with others. Talking with and listening to one another is very important for community. And yet, if we are not finding our own connectedness with God, if we are not each becoming more and more open to our relationship with God, then our relationships with each other become clamorous and greedy, our interactions filled with our own anxieties and lack of self-awareness.

This became clear to me on the first silent retreat I made many years ago at the Abbey of Gethsemani, near Lexington, Kentucky, where we were living at the time. After a day and a half of silence, when I had become settled and inwardly quiet, I walked into the refectory for the evening meal. As I approached the food counter, the brother who was serving looked up at me. Our eyes met in the most natural and peaceful way. He smiled and nodded. I smiled and nodded. I had never felt closer to a human being. This closeness came without our having said a single word to each other. I didn't know his name; he didn't know mine. The communion between us was rooted in the deepest of all sources, like two springs of water, each fed by the same underground stream.

There is a time for speaking with one another, for revealing to one another the thoughts of our hearts. Yet there is a time for being in silence together, for allowing contemplation to be at the base of our community with one another. Practicing silence together is a way of recognizing that our unity is literally in God, in Christ. This kind of practice can help us refrain from controlling and judging each other, remembering that each of us belongs first to God, not to one another. The newly formed Chrysalis Community Mission Group has as part of its mission the providing of silent retreat opportunities for our own community and others. In the fall, we will begin offering such times here on the church grounds. Our hope is that through such times of retreat together, our community will deepen and strengthen its foundation in Christ and in

God. A community grounded in silence and contemplative prayer cultivates an atmosphere of freedom, deep mutual respect and understanding, as well as a clearer, bolder sensitivity to God's will and the call of Christ.

Silence and God's Word

Practicing silence is not a withdrawal from the world. It is drawing closer to the world, opening ourselves up to the present moment and to a keener awareness of life around us. And in that clearer listening, that keener awareness, we begin to have no problem with the idea that God speaks to us—within ourselves, through others and the world. “Speak, God, for I am listening,” says the psalmist. In his book Life Together, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes: “Silence is the simple stillness of the individual under the Word of God...Silence is nothing else but waiting for God's Word and coming from God's Word with a blessing.” (p. 79) By God's Word, Bonhoeffer means not only the reading and listening to scripture, but God's living Word that is speaking to us all the time, through scripture, through the community, through the world's needs, through Christ as we live in him.

In these days of such urgent needs and pressing problems, it is so easy for us to be constantly springing into action, whether or not we know what we are doing, whether or not we feel any sense of being called in a particular direction. It is hard to remain confident in and committed to first listening for God's voice in our lives, God's calling us to a particular need, a particular mission. But if we are not practicing this kind of silence and contemplation, we end up making commitments we do not keep, going off half-cocked, only adding to confusion and chaos, and having no deep understanding of what is really needed to bring some light, some peace, some healing to people and the world.

Silence as Witness to God

Finally, a word about Jesus' silence before Pontius Pilate. Here is silence before the false and desperate voices of the world, the voices of violence, of power, the voices that do not and cannot listen for God's voice. Jesus is on trial for his life. He knows that the religious and political powers and structures have conspired together to do away with him. Yet he does not defend himself. When Pilate asks him to respond to the charges against him, Jesus falls silent. And Pilate is “amazed,” the Greek word here meaning something like “shaking in his boots.” Pilate encounters in Jesus' silence something that shakes his confidence in the world to which he has given himself.

Jesus knows that he does not have to defend himself. The truth that he knows, the truth of God and God's will and power, releases him from the temptation to get into power struggles with the pretending powers of this world. Jesus belongs to another realm, another kingdom, one that will prevail when all the human powers and structures collapse. His silence is that of one who does not fear his death and does not allow fear of death to drive him into fruitless and false ways of living.

In this way, Jesus' silence is a protest against the violent and power-hungry systems of religion and society. He knows that true life can only come about when we live out of our relationship with God. When we are doing that, we are not violent, greedy, or desiring of power over others.

The silence we practice is for the sake of others, the world, and ourselves. In returning and rest we shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be our strength.