

Silence and Call

Psalm 62:5-12 *For God alone my soul waits in silence....*

Mark 1:14-20 *And Jesus said to them, "Follow me and I will make you fish for people." And immediately they left their nets and followed him.*

Some time in the late 1970s, just after I had begun my first ministry out of seminary, I took a three-day silent retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani, near Bardstown, Kentucky. I had read Thomas Merton's books and thought that maybe I needed to go to his monastery and begin to really learn what silence and prayer are all about! That retreat started me on the path of discovering the rich blessings of silence and of taking refuge in God, as Psalm 62 says. What a relief to be physically away from the myriad of demands and expectations and burdens of life and work! What a relief not to have to talk and to be in a community of silence, inner listening, and being back in touch with life in the present moment! The silence was also a struggle. I became painfully aware of the mess my inner life was in. I was filled with stress from simply responding to outward demands and expectations, trying to please everyone and perform perfectly (whatever that meant) as minister, husband, and father. In the silence, however, I touched a deep peace that enabled me to begin the process of sorting things out, what was mine and what was not mine, who was me and who was not me, what I was called to do and what I was not called to do. I was able to begin learning how to reflect in loving kindness on myself and the life I was living. Grace. Self-acceptance and understanding. And inner listening for the living Word of God speaking to me of my uniqueness and God's particular call in my life.

The words of Psalm 62 turn our attention to the inward journey—growing in our capacity to be inwardly still and quiet, listening for God. The reading from Mark's gospel points to the outward journey, responding to the felt call of God in our unique lives and following the living Christ in loving service in the world. These are the two basic movements of the spiritual life that we work with in our community, individually and together. Our

community is part of a Christian spiritual tradition that affirms the importance of contemplation and silence, of inner listening and prayer. The living God still speaks to us so that we can be about what God wants to do for the world. So we practice waiting for God in silence.

This is not easy. Silence and inner listening are not encouraged by our culture or even by the church itself. Even though we talk about the importance of silence, I'm not sure that we really practice it to the extent that is needed. We place the greater premium on activism, getting things done, achieving results. The urgent needs of humans and the creation itself press upon us. Yet, the spiritual wisdom we as a community have inherited and try to work with says that our outward living must arise from a place within us where we hear what God is truly calling us to do and to be in the world. That is how it works. If each person is living authentically out of God's particular call in his or her life, then God's kingdom will emerge.

Hearing that call is difficult. It demands silence and inner attentiveness. We need to take refuge in God alone, as the psalmist says. I have a deepening appreciation for this reality of taking refuge in God. We have a haven from the stress and strain of living, from the barrage of our culture's confused and harmful values, from the demands of other people that keep us from discovering and staying focused on what we are called to be and do. Sometimes we need to take refuge, to run away, to withdraw. There's nothing wrong with that. But it is also a running toward...toward God and our true life.

Taking refuge in God, we practice silence, quieting our minds and hearts, coming to greater self-awareness in order to free ourselves from all the other voices and claims on our lives. This enables us to become sensitive to the spiritual directions that are inherent in our own spirits and lives. We commit our lives to spiritual disciplines of silence, prayer, and self-examination not for sake of the disciplines, as though they are laws. They are for the sake of hearing God's call, knowing the direction for our lives that God is giving us.

This leads us to speak of the outward journey, which is the point of our reading from Mark's gospel. Jesus proclaims the nearness of God's kingdom, God's dream for life. But to be part of that realm of God, we need to change, which is what repentance means. Change the way we think. Change the way we live, what we value and what we give ourselves to. Change from a life of simply responding to all the voices around us, the voices of a culture that wants to make us in its image, to a life of intimacy with God, hearing and responding to

God's call within us. Jesus calls the fishermen to leave their boats and nets and follow him. They respond immediately. They just get up and go with him. He doesn't tell them where they are going or what they will be doing except that now their lives will have something to do with "catching people." Your life and your work had one kind of purpose and meaning. Now I'm going to give you a whole new reason for living—you will live your lives for the sake of other people, for the sake of the whole world. It will no longer be about just your own existence and livelihood, your own success or survival. Your life will be lived as a blessing to the world.

Listening to God's voice within us, responding to what we come to sense God is calling us to do, is a whole different way of living from what we've been used to, from so much of what we've been taught. Jesus' call to follow him is curiously short on details. He just calls us, and we get up and go. We run along behind him, doing whatever it is that he shows us is needed. It means living our lives fully awake and alert to each moment, each relationship, each situation, awake with the love of the living God in our hearts and minds. We don't know what will happen from one moment to the next. We are on the road of learning what faith really means--not a bunch of principles or doctrines or anything like that, but living trustfully each moment of our lives. We may be called to move out in directions that seem impossible and scary to us. How in the world am I going to be faithful to this call I feel to feed the hungry? To house the homeless? To bring healing and comfort to those who suffer? To create a ministry or simply a relationship where love can reign, where God's kingdom can grow and flourish? Responding to God's call in Christ can mean doing things we never in our lives thought we could do. But we do them because we stay trustful and open, moment to moment, wide awake and receptive, teachable for the sake of the thing God wants to do through us.

A few years after I made my first retreat at Gethsemani, I had gotten to know another community, the Sisters of Loretto, whose motherhouse was just ten miles down the road from the monastery. This community was different, like ours in many ways. They had a retreat center for individuals and groups seeking silence, rest and renewal. But it was set within an active community of women who were engaged in all kinds of missions. Teaching. Social justice. Environmental sustainability. A nursing facility. Art. I quickly found this to be a far more conducive place for my retreats. I could be in silence or be in conversation—up to me and what I needed at the moment. The community was careful not to intrude on those who were there for retreat, but at the same time

warmly ready to share. This environment was compatible with my growing sense of the balance of the spiritual life between prayer and action, silence and service.

We need places in this world where people can "come and find the quiet center," as Shirley Erena Murray says in her hymn. Places of quietness and peacefulness where people can touch the wondrous reality of their own spirits, where people can find spiritual and physical rest and renewal. People need a place where they can touch their own true nature, their own spirits, their own relationship with the living God. And by taking refuge in that way, discover perhaps for the first time what they were put on this earth to be and to do.

I believe that God is calling us to develop a retreat dimension to this place and our community. This is not a new thought. For some time now this place has been whispering to us that we have a retreat center mission that has only been waiting for the right moment, the *kairos* moment, to come into being. We now need to look at our own property and that of Lynchburg Covenant Fellowship through the vision of offering this as a place of rest and renewal, of inner listening for God's call.

This morning I sound the call for a mission group to form around the vision and mission of a retreat center to be developed here. I extend this call on behalf of myself and Phil Boyce. I speak on his behalf because he could not be here this morning and because Phil presents us with an unexpected and exciting new situation for our community—a Zen Buddhist who feels called to carry the vision of a mission of the Church of the Covenant. You heard Phil speak last week of his own spiritual journey. It connected with our own stories in a way that revealed to us that God is bigger, wider, deeper than our own perceptions and language and patterns of thinking about God. I feel clearly that God has called Phil to this, has brought him here to be part of something God wants us to do. We invite anyone who feels called to explore being part of this mission to the initial meeting of a mission group on Wednesday evening, February 1, at 7:00 p.m. in the Lodge of the Fisherman. We will share with one another why we have been drawn to this vision and mission. We will talk about our life together as a mission group. We will begin listening together for what we are supposed to do.

There is much that says it is the *kairos* moment, the right time, for this mission. The interest in LCF in having retreat facilities as part of this property. The current availability of Kitty's Cottage as a retreat space for individuals and small groups. Irma Seiferth, Executive Director of LCF, and I have meet with Mark Smith of

Craddock Cunningham Architectural Partners, to discuss the renovation of the cottage to accommodate up to eight persons. The second floor of this church house can be made even more available for retreatants. There is also the openness to and excitement about this vision among the Covenant Members as we talked about it at our last meeting. Last week Phil was employed by the Camp Kum Ba Yah Board to work with Jean Clements, camp director, on a half-time basis. Phil's spiritual practice, experience, and insight bring to us the possibilities of interreligious dialogue and learning. This can be a place where Christians can come to deepen their lives in Christ and draw from the vision of being the church that this community has worked with for fifty-plus years. It can also be a place where people of different spiritual traditions can come to listen to one another, learn from one another, and out of that sharing experience their common ground and the deeper practice of their own traditions. It is the kind of vision that Gandhi had, that Dr. King had, that the wisest of our spiritual leaders today are speaking of—that we live in an age when at long last people of different religious traditions can stop killing each other, stop speaking ill of one another, and learn the truth that different paths can and do lead to the same Light, the same Truth, the same God. It is not a matter of giving up one's own path, but deepening, understanding, and appreciating one's own path through respect for and learning from others' paths. We can no longer live in the old ways of religious conflict and competition. Perhaps our little beginning here can be part of a wider change.

May the words of the psalm and of Mark's gospel encourage all of us to continue the inward journey of silence and listening for God's call in our lives, and the outward journey of following that call to make our lives a blessing to the world and to ourselves. And I invite anyone who might feel God's call to join us on Feb. 1 as we begin the journey of a new vision and mission—a place for all people to take refuge in God and to hear God's call in their lives.