

Practicing Silence

Psalms 19 ...*their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.*

James 3:1-12 ...*we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.*

Mark 8:27-38 *And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

Those who talk don't know; those who know don't talk.
--Tao te Ching

Last Monday morning Phil Boyce and I met with Salima Christie in the Lodge to share with her the vision of the Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center. Salima is a friend of our community who is Muslim. We wanted to speak with Salima about the retreat center as a place of spiritual refuge and renewal for people of all faith traditions and practices. I had not seen Salima for a good while and realized how much I had missed being in her presence. To my mind, she embodies what The Letter of James is talking about—a person whose speaking is under the guidance and control of God, who speaks and lives out of genuine and profound humility, yet with knowledge steeped in wisdom.

I went to get Salima a cup of coffee. While I was in the kitchen, the carillon at Peakland Methodist Church began playing “Taps.” I then remembered that it was the commemoration of September 11, 2001. When I sat down, the bells still playing, I could feel our hesitation as to whether to continue our conversation or embrace the silence. We fell silent. A few minutes later, “Taps” again, the second tower. And again, silence compelled us and we sat together in deep reflection.

During that silence, I became aware of the poignancy of that moment. Here I sat with two people, one a convert to Buddhism, one a convert to Islam, awash in the memory of the Trade Center attacks. Not just the memory, but the pathology of that event and how it has been used as a wellspring for violence, hate and fear rather than peace and understanding.

Phil and Salima introduced themselves to each other, how they came to their respective faiths and practices. Salima talked about the particular branch of Sufism that influenced her. It is what we might call a mystical stream of Islam that emphasizes the importance of silence. As she spoke, I realized that we were three people committed to spiritual communities that practice silence as the foundation of a life of faith.

Until I began taking silent retreats at the Abbey of Gethsemani just out of seminary, I had not appreciated the prominence of silence not only in

Christian faith and practice, but also in scripture. Like many of you, I had grown up in American Protestantism, which is very wordy! Not only was silence not practiced much, if at all, it was hardly, if ever, talked about. Now, so many years later, I see things differently. This week I came to see that silence and listening are at the core of today’s scripture readings.

Psalms 19 directs our attention to the “voiceless voice” of creation as it praises God. This “wordless word” completely surrounds us. Our spirituality must embrace the created world and our connectedness to it, or we deprive ourselves of the constant and clear witness the creation gives to its Creator. We must learn to listen to the world’s silent hymn of praise to God, or we remain unaware of the sacredness of the world and continue our destructive ways of living.

Wednesday afternoon I was down in Kitty’s Cottage putting the final coat of paint on one of the bedrooms. I was on my knees by the window painting the baseboards—painting as prayer, or prayer as painting! Through the open window drifted the sound of the steady, soft rain caressing the woods. Hardly aware of it, I had become inwardly still and quiet, inwardly joining the voiceless voice of the creation. I look forward to the day, not far off now, when we can welcome people for retreat here, so that they, too, can become inwardly still enough to hear that voiceless voice in the world and in themselves. This will strengthen them in the giving of their lives to God and to life.

The Letter of James speaks about the damage that our tongues do, to others and ourselves. James earlier said essentially this: Our work as persons and communities of faith is to be quiet and listen, and then do what we hear. As I have worked with The Letter of James in recent weeks, it occurs to me that James should be the patron saint of all monasteries and communities of silence and work, of contemplation and action. He knows how our incessant thinking and talking can bury our sensitivity to the living God and what God is calling us to do with our lives.

There has been much talking since September 11, 2001. War talk. Religious talk. Hate talk. Talk ignorant of Islam. Christian talk devoid of the teachings and spirit of Jesus. Talk that inflames, hurts, perpetuates misunderstanding. The Letter of James has made new sense to me. James writes that we must first listen, not talk. We must listen and then live what we hear from God, from the gospel, the good news of God’s love in Christ. Now he writes that our tongues, our talking must be bridled. James isn’t impressed by human eloquence or learning. Not many of you should be teachers, because those who think they know enough to teach will be judged harshly. I thought here of the famous verse of the *Tao te Ching*: *Those who talk don't know; those who know, don't talk.*

The tongue causes problems because it is connected to our minds that become stuffed with all kinds of muddled thinking. Our tongues reveal what is in our minds and our hearts. George Allen has reminded us recently of that. A bigoted “slip of the tongue” is not just an unfortunate and

harmless mistake. It reveals what is in the mind and heart, the framework through which one looks at the world. The tongue that talks continually about “our enemies” sees the world in terms of good guys and bad guys, and is always looking for enemies, us and them. The tongue that talks in ways that put down others or demeans them is guided by a mind that feels defensive and inferior, looking for ways to put others down. Better to bridle our tongues, says James. Better to be silent and look within ourselves to see the condition of our own hearts and minds. When we practice silence and deep listening to our own hearts and minds, we discern what is life giving and what is destructive. Then we can choose to live out of what James calls the fresh water rather than the brackish.

Mark’s gospel gives us another perspective on silence. Peter has just made the “good confession,” that Jesus is the messiah, the one God has sent to bring new life to the world. In Matthew’s version of the story, Jesus praises Peter for his spiritual insight. But in Mark, Jesus “sternly orders” the disciples to keep quiet about it. This important gospel story should cause us to look critically at what passes for “evangelism” today—talking a lot about Jesus without embodying his spirit and teachings in our own lives.

Jesus then tells the disciples about the way of the cross, the way of faithfulness that leads to suffering, rejection, death, then to new life, the resurrection. All Peter seems to hear is the bit about suffering and rejection. It is not what he wants to hear. Peter probably wants Jesus to lead a successful religious movement or stand up to the power structures and overthrow them. The kind of life Jesus is talking about looks like failure, not success, weakness, not strength. Jesus quickly silences Peter, tells him to get out of the way. Peter’s mind is still asleep to God’s ways, entangled in worldly ways of thinking.

Jesus then calls the crowd standing around to come closer, and he teaches them all about the way of discipleship. Those who want to follow him must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him. If you try to hang onto your life, you lose it. If you let go of your life for the sake of Jesus and all he represents, and for the sake of the good news of the gospel, you will find your life. What have you gained if you are attached to all the stuff the world offers? Nothing. You squander the precious life you have been given.

No wonder Jesus tells the disciples not to talk about his messiahship. Peter missed the meaning of it. Even the best of us miss the point, especially when we think we’ve got it all wrapped up neatly in our theologies. There is often much talk about Jesus that is empty of love, compassion, non-violence, forgiveness, justice. The way of discipleship, the way of true life, Jesus says, involves the on-going transformation of our own lives, losing our selves, transcending the self, going beyond our selves. That alone is the way of true life, says Jesus.

Basic to all the world’s major religious traditions is the spiritual work of the transformation of the self. For us as Christians, it is the way of

the cross, the way of living in the world for the sake of God’s loving will and giving our lives into that will. It involves the hard spiritual work of become aware and letting go of those attitudes and ways of thinking that make us the center of the universe. It is the dying of the small self so that the larger self, the true and authentic self, can emerge, the self that finds itself in love, in reaching out.

A part of Christian life is certainly sharing with others the word about Jesus Christ. There are times we are called to speak words of comfort or truth or compassion. There are times we are called to teach. But more important is this call to keep it to ourselves, to ponder in our hearts the fuller meaning of Jesus and to become as sensitive as we can to the presence of the living Christ. It’s not about talking about Jesus; it’s about being the persons he calls us to be and doing what he calls us to do with our own unique lives.

Let us continue to be and become even more a community that practices silence--

the silence that attunes us to the creation of which we are part and enables us to join the voiceless voice of praise to God,

the silence that enables us to bridle our tongues so that we do not add to the seeds of hurt, violence, and fear in the world, through our words or our actions,

the silence in which we listen to the living Christ, who he really is and what he is calling us to do as we follow on the path of love that is willing to suffer in the service of life.