

September 13, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### Silence and Listening

Proverbs 1:20-33 *...but those who listen to me will be secure and will live at ease, without dread of disaster.*

Psalm 19 *There is not speech, nor are there words; 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 *How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.*

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

I came to this community in great part because it is grounded in the practice of silence and inner listening. As members, we commit ourselves to the regular and daily practice of prayer, which includes growing in our capacity for outward and inward stillness and silence. This is so we can listen, listen to what is going on in our own heads and hearts, so that our thoughts and emotions do not control us. We practice becoming inwardly quiet enough to be present to ourselves, to the world around us, and to God. The silence enables us to grow in awareness of God and what our relationship with God means for the way we live. We listen so that we know God's call in our lives and the gifts we are given to use in the service of life.

The life of faith is sustained and nourished by silence and listening. Yet, it is not easy for us to return to this kind of contemplative living. I say "return" because, contrary to what we may think, young children have this capacity. Their inner life is yet uncluttered and undisturbed by all the stuff they will acquire over the years. Therefore they see and hear and sense things clearly and directly, and, we might say, truly. We do not lose that part of ourselves; it simply becomes buried. We grow up and live in a culture filled with talking, noise, movement, agitation, and what Thich Nhat Hanh calls "habit energy". We find it hard to keep still. Everything around us says that what matters is running, achieving, making an impression, standing out. Our faith tradition, however, calls us to our

true selves with the words of Psalm 46: “Be still, and know that I am God”. Literally, that means stop fighting inwardly and outwardly, stop struggling, and know God. Let the inward turmoil die down so that you can be aware of what is most real, what is of God and your relationship with God.

Let us look at our readings for this week in light of the importance of our being a faith community with the foundation of silence and listening and contemplation.

In the Book of Proverbs, Woman Wisdom calls out continually to people to come and listen to what she has to teach. Wisdom was understood as a part of God, and was imagined as female. Wisdom taught essentially one thing—the “fear of God”, which is central to Hebrew Scriptures. It does not mean being in terror of God, afraid that God is “going to get us” if we misstep. The fear of God means living with a sense of awe at the sacredness of life, because God is present fully in all that God has made. It means that we are to harmonize our living with that awareness, that “fear”.

Therefore, **we listen in order to be aware of the sacred dimension of life.** We listen in order to see through the superficial and life-diminishing things which we have bought into. For the Book of Proverbs, the beginning of wisdom is the “fear of God”, living with awareness of God and our relationship to God. And the beginning of a life of sacred awareness is listening. What Wisdom calls foolishness or simpleness means living as though we know everything when we really do not know the things that matter most, or when we deliberately continue to refuse to listen and learn. Our spiritual tradition is in conflict with the culture in which we live. It says to us that true knowledge or wisdom is gained when we acknowledge our not-knowing. We are called to humility and openness, not arrogance and dogmatism. What we call knowledge has enabled us to do many great things, yet also has brought the destruction of human and creational life. Wisdom that comes from inward silence and listening sees more deeply and broadly. It sees that all we do must be done in the awareness of the sacredness of life, that is, the “fear of God”. We must see not what is good for human beings only, but for all of the creation, and certainly NOT what is good for only some human beings.

We practice silence and listening **so that we can hear the “voiceless voice” of God in the creation of which we are part.** Psalm 19 is one of many psalms that speak of the creation singing praise to God, or telling us “of the glory of God”. Everything around us declares, or expresses, God's presence and power. And yet, says the psalm, “there is no speech nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all

the earth, and their words to the end of the world.”

This psalm, like others (Ps. 8, for instance), tell us that essential to our created humanity is our capacity to hear this voiceless voice of the creation. We hear the wind, the rain, the waves crashing, the birds singing, the thunder growling, the spring frogs chirruping. It stirs our sense of the beauty and grandeur of the world. Yet, there is a deeper listening that opens up in us, as we let ourselves become more and more inwardly still and quiet. In that listening, we hear the silent sound or song of God's presence and power.

A Native American prayer that we sometimes pray together has these words: “Make my ears sharp to hear your voice.” The native people of this land, whom we slaughtered nearly to extinction and continue to oppress, have so much to teach us. The “ears” in the prayer are not only the physical ear that catches sounds, but the inner ear of the spirit, the soul, our truest self that is able to “hear” God within the world around us. This has always been in our own spiritual tradition, yet it has not been taught us as a real practice essential to our living. This, also, is why the discipline or practice of silence and listening is one of the membership commitments we make. We practice it as part of our personal inward journey, and we practice it together in our mission groups and in our worship here. We do so to become more and more sensitive to and aware of that “voiceless voice” of God's presence and glory in all of life, including our own lives.

In the Letter of James, the writer puts it as strongly as possible: The tongue is a world of trouble and causes destruction near and far, even throughout the whole of creation. James has nothing positive to say about the tongue except that with our speaking, we are able to bless God. Even there, we will bless God one moment and curse human beings, who bear God's image, the next. The only purpose of our speaking is to bless, to heal, to enlighten, to comfort, to speak truth when called for. Otherwise, says James, our tongues are not only useless but dangerous. I think we all know and have experienced it. And all of us have spoken in ways that harm or come out of our lack of wisdom and knowledge. **We practice silence so that our speaking will rise out of love and truth, and will be a blessing of God and life.**

When we practice silence, our speaking becomes less. We see how unnecessary it is to speak so much, rather than direct our thoughts and meditations and reflections into good and loving actions. When we are practicing silence as part of our inward journey life, we tend to speak only when we have something to say that will truly help, instead of just

filling the air with our own words. And we learn how to keep silence when we know that we do not know something!

I have noticed and remarked to others the difference I find working within this community, as opposed to previous experience. When we meet together here, in our Covenant Members meetings, mission groups, studies, or other kinds of meetings, there is a prevailing peace and productiveness that I firmly believe is the effect of our practice of silence and inner listening. There is far less tension due to people trying to get their way or argue their point. There is the sense that we are together for a common, deeper purpose than our own egos and our own ideas of how we think things should be. The practice of silence and inward listening is essential for a community that genuinely seeks to live according to the leading of God's spirit. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his little book **Life Together** that as disciples of Jesus, as communities of Jesus, we have what he called the "ministry of holding one's tongue". Grounded in the practice of inward peace and listening, our speaking becomes less for the sake of healing, truth, faithfulness, and love.

Finally, from the reading from Mark's gospel a story that is at the heart of our spiritual tradition. It is about who Jesus is and is not, and about what it means to follow him. As Jesus and the disciples are walking along, he asks them what people are saying about him, who they say he is. At first the disciples report that some identify Jesus with significant prophetic figures, like John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the other prophets. There was a kind of reincarnational view that powerful religious leaders from the past could re-emerge in a new prophet. Jesus changes the question. Who do you say that I am? This question calls for one's personal insight or belief. Peter speaks right up. You are the messiah, the one God has sent to us. Jesus orders the disciples to say nothing to anyone about it.

In the gospels, there is what scholars call the "messianic secret". Jesus on several occasions orders his disciples to be quiet about him as messiah or Son of Man. You would think Jesus, or the gospel writers in the early church, would want to tell everyone who he is! Why would Jesus silence his followers on this? The answer comes in the rest of the reading. Jesus begins explaining that the Son of Man must suffer, be rejected by the religious establishment, and be killed, after which he would rise again. Peter will not have it. He takes Jesus aside and "rebukes" him. This is not the way a messiah acts. The messiah, or Christ, is to be triumphant, bringing in God's rule and throwing out the non-believers. But now Jesus turns to the disciples and rebukes Peter in front of them. Get

behind me, Satan! Your mind is mired in human thinking, not divine thinking. He calls Peter Satan, the one who stands in the way of what God is doing in and for the world.

We as Jesus' followers can, and often do, get in the way of what God is and wants to do. We think we know who Jesus is and how God works, and we do not hesitate to talk about it and impose it on others. We denounce those we think do not "believe" in Jesus or "believe" in him the way we do. We misrepresent who Jesus is and what he is about, ignoring his teachings as we judge and violate others with our dogmatic views. Do we perhaps see now why Jesus ordered his disciples to keep quiet about him? Silence, once again, is preferable to speaking in wrong ways about Jesus. It is not hard to see, from history and in current events, that the speaking and actions of Christians reveal that they do not know who Jesus really is.

Jesus goes on to lay out what it means to be his followers. Take up your own cross and follow me. The cross is a symbol of faithfulness to and love of God within the concrete realities of our own lives. Jesus had his cross. We have ours. It is not the triumphant cross that some Christians have used to judge and intimidate, and even harm others, physically or spiritually. It is not the cross of religion, but a way of living as human beings. It is the cross of servanthood, of self-giving. Jesus talks about our need to lose our lives in order to save, or find them. The word "life" here (*psuche*) means our innermost, truest being or self. Clinging to our own safety and comfort and status brings the opposite results—we lose it all. The only way to truly live is to quit living self-defensively and learn the spiritual truth and practice of letting everything go. When we stop defending our possessions, our status, our egos, and become the open channels of God's redemptive love, then we find out what it means to truly live as human beings. This is why it is so puzzling, if not disturbing, to see popular Christianity promoting material prosperity, nationalistic pride and militaristic strength, and even the possession of guns as having anything to do with who Jesus is and the way to which he calls us.

Those who are ashamed of me, says Jesus, of them I will be ashamed. Being ashamed of Jesus means living and speaking in ways that are contrary to who he really is as the suffering servant who calls us to the way of servanthood. He calls us to, leads us along, and goes with us on this way of our true life. We can only find, walk, and remain in that way if we are learning how to be silent, how to really, deeply listen.

There are many reasons why it is so important that we are and remain a spiritual community that takes seriously the practice of silence and listening, of inward quietness. I

believe that our world sorely needs communities that are grounded in silence and deep listening. They become like anchors for a world that is so often in turmoil, lost in the cacophony of noises and voices that mislead, disturb, and fill us with illusions and delusions. When we faithfully practice an inward journey that includes silence and inward quietness, we do it not only for our own sake but for the sake of the world. We do it in order to be faithful followers of Jesus who leads us to our authentic life.