

“It begins with Silence”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 3/31/19

Matthew 4:8-11

Mark 8:34-37

Many times in our lives we find ourselves at a crossroads where one decision can change the trajectory of our life. There are points in time in our past that some of us can probably name where one specific decision at that moment led us to where we now find ourselves today. The theory of the butterfly effect plays on the notion that the butterfly in any part of the world flaps its wing at the exact right moment to send the final water molecule flying into the thunderous rain cloud, causing a torrential downpour that subsequently floods a village and perhaps takes lives with it: A chain reaction of events leading to dire consequences. With a lifetime of decisions to make, how can we be sure we make the right decisions. Some say weigh all decisions with Scriptural principles or wisdom truths. Do they match up? If not, choose something else that does.

Jesus in his weakest of moments where he to face decisions of desperation while fasting for forty days, found himself at crossroads after crossroads. At first he was tempted to eat when he was fasting. He responded with “We shall not live on bread alone, but on every word of God.” When experiencing obvious depression and loneliness, tempted to end it all, he ultimately responded with “Thou shall not tempt the Lord thy God,” in lieu of taking his own life. And finally, as we just read, when Jesus was faced with idea of ultimate power and wealth, and could acquire it by simply changing his allegiance away from God, Jesus responded with “Worship the Lord your God and only Adonai shall you serve.” Jesus chose the eternal over the immediate, the spiritual over the material; this was the last test of all.

Most of you here today are here because when faced with similar ambitions, you also chose the spiritual over the material. You are on a life-giving journey of personal freedom. You seek to place your efforts into the act of working on oneself for its own betterment, leaning in to learn from within, and when leaning out to learn from without. You come at it from a place of humility, desiring to know more. You are teachable. You are hungry and thirsty for something greater than the material things of this world. You aren’t here to learn how to make more money. You aren’t here to figure how to pay your bills. You are here for you, the real you, the one who wants to truly live, not simply survive.

Mother Teresa devoted her life to giving life to others, caring for the most rejected people of society, the untouchables. She disavowed personal comfort to comfort those around her. In her life of selfless ministry in Calcutta, India, she created a set of cards with these sayings on them, and in this order—as reminders of God’s desire for all of us:

The fruit of silence is PRAYER.

The fruit of prayer is FAITH.

The fruit of faith is LOVE.

The fruit of love is SERVICE.

The fruit of service is PEACE.

Silence represents the taking up of our cross, the diminishing of one's ego—as John the Baptist put it, “I must decrease that he may increase.” It starts with silence. It starts with true humility. Even as your mind still swirls with personal dilemmas, to-do lists, and the noise of life—you must purposely calm it, and point it into a peaceful rest. Stop fighting, just for a moment. Let it all go. Let the mind still. Let the ego shrink—and then finally we enter through silence into prayer. From prayer we draw faith. Scripture says that “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the words of God.” This requires listening, which requires silence. Silence draws us to prayer, and prayer draws us to faith. Mother Teresa then says that the fruit of faith is Love. As we grow in faith, or better yet trust, we pour out a love to first ourselves, and then to others. The Apostle Paul says of all the gifts, “the greatest of these is love.” It is often the starting point for the most heroic manifestations of care that we see in the world, like that of Mother Teresa's ministry to the poorest of the poor. Jesus said all the law and the prophets hang on this idea of “love”: Love the Lord your God with your entire being and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Once you transform into a conduit of love, you find channels of service to others and only in that service, according to Mother Teresa, you will find peace that moves from inner to outer. This is how we transform the world. It starts with us. You have a choice, to gain the whole world with its kingdoms and its material wealth, or you can bring peace to the world—beginning with silence, the fruit of which is prayer, the fruit of which is faith, the fruit of which is love, the fruit of which is service, the fruit of which is peace. But it begins with Silence. I invite you all to renew your own journeys this next Saturday at our mid-year silent retreat. Unfortunately, our friends from the local Sufi Muslim community will be unable to join us this time, but we will still run the retreat like we have in the past. We will begin at 9am here in the chapel for a short moment of worship and instruction, and then begin our personal journeys of reflection and prayer, then pausing for lunch together, most likely also in silence, which is an experience you will never forget, and then continue into personal work for the next two hours before once again gathering as a group, and breaking our silence for those who wish to briefly share what we have learned during our retreat time. So, please consider joining us that day. It will be a day refreshment and quite possibly a starting point of a chain reaction that could result in more than just personal transformation but societal transformation... It begins with us.

Shalom