

“Silence: Allowing Muddy Waters to Settle”

Date: July 24, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Lamentations 3:19-28; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Psalm 46

Theme: Prayer, Silence

Occasion: Prayer series

“The story is told of a group of friends who went swimming one day. One of the swimmers lost a ring in the bottom of the lake. Everyone started diving from different directions until there was so much mud and sand stirred up that no one could see anything.

Finally, they decided to clear the water. They waited silently on the shore for the mud, from all their activity, to settle. When it finally cleared, one person dove in slowly and picked up the ring.”

That’s what silence can do for us in our spiritual lives. “When we are confused about something in our lives, we will often hear answers and advice from all directions. Our friends will tell us one thing and our families another, until we feel pretty well mixed up.”

“If we look away from our problem and let patience and time do their work, the mud inside us will settle and clear. Our answer will become visible, like the glimmer of silver in the water.” (Borrowed from “Today’s Gift,” by Anonymous, published by Hazelden Foundation, 1991)

Today is the fifth Sunday in our sermon series on prayer. Our topic today is silence. There are numerous scripture passages that lift up the value and importance of silence in our lives. Ecclesiastes 3:7 says: “There is a time to speak, and a time to keep silence.” Our passage from Lamentations advocates for silence. Listen again:

“The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul that seeks Him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord. Let him sit alone in silence.”

Psalm 62:1 says, “For God alone my soul waits in silence.”

Habakkuk 2:20: “The Lord is in His holy temple, let all the earth keep silence before Him.” Job 13:5 advises – “Oh that you would keep silent; and it would be your wisdom.” And the verse that really speaks to my heart, Psalm 46:10 – “Be still and know that I am God.”

The Scriptures tell us that silence is a good thing. But we have a real aversion to observing times of silence. We live in a noisy world. Think about it. Cars speed down our streets; TV’s blare in the living room; radios are kept on in the car; and all kinds of electronic devices from MP3 players to ipads to CD players amuse us with some kind of noise. Rarely is there a moment in our day when there is any silence.

In addition to those noises, we also have words. Newspapers, books, computer screens, billboards, signs, messages and notes are all clamoring for our attention, day and night.

And don’t forget the electronic devices that cry out for your attention – cell phones, pagers, computers. You’ve got e-mail, Facebook, Twitter and who knows what else asking that you pay attention to them. Could we go a day, a week, a month without our devices? Some could; many could not.

Melannie Svoboda in her book *Everyday Epiphanies* tells us “The Trappist monks have a saying: ‘Speak only when it improves the silence.’” She goes on to say, “If only the rest of the world would live by that maxim! But the reality is, for most of us, noise and words are the norm; silence is the exception.”

How will we ever know God if we don’t learn how to be still, if we don’t learn how to observe periods of silence in our lives? Silence

allows the muddy waters of our mind to clear, so that we can discover that which we have been looking for all along, intimacy with God.

Many, perhaps most people, find silence uncomfortable. Some people will talk, just to fill the emptiness of a room if no one else is talking. Silence bothers them. During prayer time at worship, if the pastor waits too long to begin his prayer, people begin to shuffle in their seats, wondering, "What's taking him so long?"

Our worship service itself is filled with words and music and activity. Little time is left to "be still and know God." Even our time alone with God can be filled with the noise of activity: reading, talking to God about our busy schedule, planning our day, maybe writing in a journal. All good things, but rarely is there any space for silence.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk who revered silence wrote, "A man who loves God necessarily loves silence." Herman Melville once said, "Silence is the consecration of the universe. Silence is the invisible laying on of hands by the Divine Pontiff, God, upon the world. Silence is the only Voice of our God." What a profound thought!

The proverb may say "Silence is golden," but our words betray us. Why then is silence so difficult for us? What is it about silence that we fear? I have a couple ideas. If we're honest, most of us would admit to thinking that being silent isn't a very productive thing to do.

Our busy schedules show, we don't really believe the way to a deeper spirituality is through quiet meditation and silence before God. We have become like our culture: performance-based and out-come oriented. Silence seems like a waste of time.

A deeper reason we avoid silence, though, is that we may be afraid of what God will say to us, if we do keep silent and listen. Because if we do wait, if we do listen, God will speak. And when God speaks He will show us who we really are.

Many are afraid of facing the man or the woman in the mirror, not wanting to see the selfish side of themselves, the smallness of their soul, the depravity of their thoughts, the mean-spiritedness of their thinking. God's presence clarifies things. The very thought of seeing ourselves as God sees us may frighten us.

Intimacy with God is what we all want, but familiarity is all that most ever achieve. Intimacy is dangerous – it involves being known deeply and profoundly. Instead, what most of us have is a bunch of facts about God in our head. But there is no real intimacy.

If we're going to have a sincere and authentic relationship with our holy God, we will need to learn how to observe times of silence. That is to say, times of simply being in the presence of the Lord and waiting for God to speak. It will involve having the courage to face what is revealed. But at least our faith will be the real thing.

Silence, then, could be said to be a matter of trust. It is the place where we trust ourselves to be alone. It is the place where we trust our deepest thoughts, the ones we hide from everyone else, to the One who already knows those thoughts, and loves us still.

We babble with strangers, but with intimates we can be silent. "We make conversation" when we are at a loss. But when we are with One who knows us completely *and* still loves us, we can trust the silence. In silence, we let the muddy waters of our mind settle, and

allow the Holy Spirit to reveal what we've been looking for, God Himself.

Sitting quietly with God is a discipline that will take time and practice to cultivate. It won't be easy at first. You will be distracted by the noise, of all the words inside your head. But practice and you will learn to appreciate and enjoy the silence.

So, to get started, find a quiet time and place to meet with God. This is not a when-ever-it-will-fit-into-my-schedule appointment. You need to plan for it. It needs to be a non-distracting place and time where you can allow your mind to slow down.

You may wish to read a short passage of scripture to focus your mind upon. One or two words will jump off the page and just seem to "speak to you." Focus on listening. Repeat those one or two words slowly in your mind.

Ask God to come closer to you. Ask God to teach you how to slow down your thinking, so that you can hear his voice better.

A warning: be careful not to imagine, what you think is supposed to happen in your experience. There is no way God will ever fit into your concept or your expectations.

And finally, don't be discouraged. When your mind wanders, gently bring it back to the one or two words you've been repeating. Silence is a valuable form of prayer, worthy of our time and practice. Intimacy with God, like oak trees growing, takes time.

Hear the words of the psalmist once again, knowing it is God who is speaking. "Be still, and know that I am God." Amen.

Resources:

"Why Are We Afraid to be Quiet Before God?" by Tim Sanford, an article in *Discipleship Journal*, Issue 89, 1995, pp. 89-92.

"The Eloquent Sounds of Silence," an essay by Pico Iyer in *Time* magazine, January 25, 1993.

Melannie Svoboda, *Everyday Epiphanies: Seeing the Sacred in Every Thing*, "Silence," p. 138-9, Twenty-Third Publications: Mystic, CT, 2003.