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The Cancer of Silence

Mark 10: 46-52

A series of contemporary cell phone commercials about dropped calls illustrates in a light-hearted way the danger of silence. A young man calls a young woman the morning after a wonderful first date and says, "I know I shouldn't call this early, but I really thought we connected last night."

The girl can be seen affirming his sentiment, but all he hears is silence – and he is devastated.

A young businesswoman suggests to her boss that he accelerate her promotion through the company, and her boss can be seen agreeing, but all she hears is silence – and she is crushed.

A young woman calls a friend after receiving a beautiful bouquet of flowers from her boyfriend. She jokes, "Everybody has been saying that he must have done something really wrong," and her friend can be seen reassuring her that this is not the case, but all she hears is silence – and her mind assumes the worst.

As for me, I was introduced to the topic of the dark-side of silence some forty years ago through a song by one of the troubadours of my generation, Paul Simon. Its truth still falls fresh upon my ears:

"Hello darkness, my old friend; I've come to talk with you again.

Because a vision softly creeping, left its seeds while I was sleeping.

And the vision that was planted in my brain, still remains, within the sound of silence."

Silence is golden, goes the old saying. Surely, sometimes it is.

The great door outside the sanctuary where I worshipped as a child

bore a plaque that issued a single, simple command to those who entered: "Silence."

Likewise, libraries and golf courses place a premium on silence, for they all deem silence necessary and conducive to contemplation, meditation, worship and concentration. They have a point.

But silence also has a dark, sinister and unhealthy side. It can be a tool of destruction,

a truth Paul Simon tried to bring to the fore when he described people "who were talking without speaking, people hearing without listening, people writing songs that voices never shared –

and no one dared . . . disturb the sound of silence."

As a youngster I wondered at Simon's paradoxical language. What could he mean when describing people talking without speaking, hearing without listening?

But in a culture where talk shows chatter on for hours without ever saying anything of importance, a world where people keep their televisions and radios on constantly simply to have noise in the background of their lives, in a world accustomed to living amidst a ceaseless babble that everyone hears without truly listening to it, I now grasp *exactly* what the songwriter means.

Our world has never been noisier, yet we suffer a silence that can best be defined as the absence of meaningful sound, the absence of meaningful communication.

Few people dare to speak words of true meaning. Few dare to listen to words of piercing purpose.

Our world teems with chattering voices, but the conversations are surface and glib, devoid of true passion.

We live, ironically, in an era that historians will surely refer to as the age of communication, "the information age" -- nevertheless, ours is a time when few people dare to disturb the sound of silence.

On this Mother's Day, let us begin by noting the silence of estrangement that characterizes many parent-child relationships.

The conversation begins, "Mom, can I go do such-and-such?" "No, you may not."
"Why not?" "Because I said so."
"Jenny's parents are letting her." "Jenny is three years older."
"When are you going to let me grow up?" "When you start acting more mature."
"How can I act more mature when you don't trust me." "I trust you, I just don't think . . ."

Stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp, SLAM!! LOCK !!

(A completely hypothetical situation, right?)

There it is, the shut door, the slammed-shut-locked door symbolic of the silence of estrangement. The door opens eventually, but the barrier of silence remains, blocking communication, impeding understanding, preventing reconciliation, everyone walking on edge, captives of silence, until someone finds a way to say, "I disagree with you, but I still love you. Let's talk this out."

Usually, these little incidents of estrangement pass and reconciliation ensues.

But as we get older, family silences often become harder to dispel, until people reach the point where they find it easier to talk to strangers than to their own flesh and blood.

What a deadly and destructive cancer such a silence of estrangement can become!

So many of our deadly silences root in our destructive pride, a pride that breeds stubbornness.

I love novelist Gabriel Garcia Marquez's story about the couple whose half-century of marriage almost ended over a bar of soap.

The husband, a renowned physician used to getting his own way, calls to his wife from his morning bath, "You put no soap in the bathroom." She sleepily calls back, "Yes, I did. You need only to look for it."

He responds with a hard edge, "There is no soap." She snaps back, with a harder edge, "Yes there is!"

The two soon lock horns in a titanic battle of wills, ceasing to speak to each other.

Of course, they had not truly been communicating for several years.

The soap battle represented the culmination of a long process of encroaching silence,

but their silence over soap threatened to tear apart the relationship that had defined their lives for fifty years.

Finally, the doctor realized that he loved his wife more than he loved his pride.

He came into her presence, smiled at her for the first time in months and said simply, "There was soap."

The destructive cycle of silence was broken.

That story rings true,

for surely the greatest threat to relationships today is not sexual, financial, or vocational but conversational.

The universal line every marriage counselor hears from every troubled couple is

"We don't talk any more. He won't listen to me. She won't open up to me."

Too many relationships develop the deadly skill of pretending to listen to each other.

Needless to say, the moment we decide that our spouse is not worth talking to and listening to,

the sooner comes the moment when we have nothing to talk about; then love begins the process of dying.

Silence, of course, is a devastating tool of punishment.

We withhold our words from people to signal our displeasure with them.

But our unbroken silence soon breeds hatred.

Unbroken silence escalates minor disagreements into full-scale enmity,

which is why our Lord Jesus cautions us not to let the sun go down on our anger.

For the longer we employ silence, the more permanent that silence becomes,

and the more effort is required to break that silence -- and the more lasting are the scars.

In the last few years the U.S. Congress has passed laws to shield so-called "whistle-blowers," from reprisals and job loss. In recent years, soldiers, policemen, medical officers,

even workers in nuclear plants have been punished for breaking their silence about abuses and injustices. Yet, had not these so-called “trouble-makers” found the courage to break the code of acquiescent silence, these abuses and injustices would still be continuing.

Silence is often the refuge of the coward, for we frequently allow words of hatred, bigotry, gossip and obscenity to be said in our presence without protest, refusing to risk speaking words of challenge.

Martin Niemoller, the great Lutheran pastor living in Nazi Germany, came ruefully to realize and express the danger hidden in the silence of acquiescence:

“When they came for the Jews I said nothing, because I was not a Jew.

When they came for the Catholics I said nothing, because I was not a Catholic.

When they came for the gypsies I said nothing, because I was not a gypsy.

But when they came for me there was no one left to speak.”

We know at times we need to be silent to hear the voice of God,

but sometimes our silence before God is rooted in timidity, cowardice.

So the Scriptures talk of a time when Jesus comes from Jericho accompanied by an adoring crowd poised to worship, to have their souls inspired and saved by his powerful words.

They are not ready to have their silence disturbed by an outcry of genuine human need.

But suddenly a blind beggar named Bartimaeus cries out, “Jesus, have mercy on me!”

The crowd responds, ‘Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!’

The Bible says, “Many rebuked him, telling him to be silent.”

I wonder how often these worshippers are representatives of the church universal,

a body often bent on maintaining silence as yet one more tool of oppression.

Think of the Protestant churches in compliance with the Vatican that kept silent in the face of Nazi atrocities!

Over against the cries of the violated masses, the church cried out, “Shhhh ! Keep silent!”

Think of the southern churches that kept silence in the face of violent racism.

Over against the cries of the oppressed, good Christians cried, “Silence! Just let us worship God!”

Think of the cries today of the homosexual community for justice and acceptance as human beings.

Over against their cries so much of society says “Silence! Keep your needs to yourself.”

Think of Christians in countries across the world tortured and killed for their faith.

Yet governments across the world, sometimes including our own, cry out,

“Keep silence! Don’t upset our economies and balances of trade!”

Sometimes what nettles us most are the lone, persistent voices in a congregation crying out constantly of their need. How often we are tempted to try to squelch their voices with an exasperated cry of “Silence!”

But the blind man Bartimaeus calls out all the louder, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Jesus summons him before him and rewards him for his willingness to break his silence:

“Go your way, your faith has made you well.”

How many of us need to summon the courage to break our silence in response to the beckoning voice of God?

Sometimes it is not we who are silent before God, but it is God who appears to be silent before us.

Then we must summon the courage to protest the silence of God in our lives.

Perhaps we feel almost blasphemous in demanding that God speak with us, yet in truth it takes great faith to challenge the silence of God.

(As Lee Gray said in his prayer, “God is big enough to handle the truth.”)

It takes great courage to cry out as Jesus did from the cross,

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Sometimes, we beg God for a sign of what path we should take, but God is silent.

Sometimes we beg God for a word of deliverance, but God is silent.
To challenge God's silence seems frightening,
for it seems to call into question God's providence for our lives.
But such protests must be spoken if we are to remain honest with God, as friend with friend.
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
are honest words, words asked as a loving son would ask a father for an explanation.
God would expect nothing less from us than our honest word of protest against the divine silence.
When we least expect it, God will answer our demand to break silence. God will speak to us.
I think of Shusaku Endo's harrowing but magnificent novel *Silence*, about a Catholic missionary
who is captured by the Japanese government, which has outlawed Christianity.
In the novel's climax, several of the missionary's colleagues are hung upside down over a pit,
with a small incision made over their ears to allow the blood to drip slowly, painfully, from their bodies.
They are meant to hang there in excruciating torture until the missionary steps on
and defaces a picture of the Christ.
The missionary, who has spent the entire novel protesting God's silence,
who has spent the entire novel railing against God's refusal to provide a word of direction or solace,
does not know what to do. Trample upon the very face of his Lord – unthinkable!
But suddenly Christ breaks his silence, speaking to him out of picture:
"Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know the pain in your foot.
Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into the world.
It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross."
So the priest answers the word of Christ in obedience, in a most painful act of love,
becoming unrighteous in the eyes of the people, in the eyes of the church, in his own eyes,
stepping upon the face of Jesus in order truly to hear for the first time in his life the suffering of others.
Sometimes we must be noisy in the presence of God so we can be heard,
and sometimes we must be noisy in the absence of God
in order to open our thirsty souls up to God's unfathomable grace.

Paul Simon wrote it,
but Jesus just as easily could have said it:
"Fools," said I, "you do not know.
Silence like a cancer grows.
Hear my words that I might teach you.
Take my arms that I might reach you.'
But my words like silent raindrops fell . . .
and echoed in the wells of silence."

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