

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

May 12, 1991

On April 29th, 1984, yours truly stood in this pulpit to give my first sermon. Those who were here that day may not have realized it, but I was a little nervous--ok, I was scared to death. The theme for that sermon was the marriage of silence and spiritual formation. Ironically, many of you may have heard the voice of God that day, but you couldn't hear me. Those who did hear me couldn't understand. I don't know why! So for my concluding sermon, I thought I would pick up this theme again. But this time give it a new twist.

Just as on that occasion, I have selected an experience in the life of Elijah the prophet to serve as the foundation for my thoughts. Many of you could preach this sermon on the subject of silence. You have set out on a 10-12 hour drive with the entire family. With three or four little ones, ranging in age from 2 to 10, along with Rover, the family pet, drooling on everyone. After several hours of driving and after answering the question, "How much further?" twenty times, as well as breaking up several fights, you know the meaning of silence. The comedian, Bill Cosby, said that "parents don't want justice, they want quiet!"

The hypothesis for this reflection can be summed up in the truth that silence without and within is the path to a deep spiritual life while hectic activity and noise is the road to exhaustion. All we have to do to prove the points in this hypothesis is observe this story of Elijah and ourselves.

I. THE RESULTS OF NOISE

Elijah was a moody and noisy man much like a pushy used car salesman and TV Lenny all wrapped up into one. Prior to his seclusion in the cave he was tested by the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Loud and boisterous, he was confident in himself and God as he met the empty Baal gods and defeated them. He won and the priests of Baal lost.

A. But Queen Jezebel comes into the picture. As a devotee of Baal as well as a poor loser, she was determined to kill the prophet. Under such a threat, Elijah lost his victorious confidence and fled to

the wilderness. Exhausted, he sits down under a broom tree (juniper) and prayed, "O Lord take away my life."

His mind, which had previously been clear and concise, was frustrated by crisis. His emotions hung limp with no freshness or vitality. The noisy victory he won now seemed futile regardless of how bravely he had fought. The scenario of his life could be compared to Olympic gold medal winners who become depressed shortly after their heroic moments. With all their physical training, they forgot to train the soul for the living of life.

B. Even though committed to God, Elijah's public prayers were more of a theatrical performance than a means to a personal relationship with God. Yet, God answered Elijah's prayer with a miracle. Elijah made fun of the Baal priests like the University of Wisconsin football coach kidding the other team. Or, maybe that is the other way around. In all of this, Elijah could see, hear and smell the activity of God. A victory was won yet he gained no real sense of the presence of God. If he had, he would have had the confidence to face Jezebel.

Pastors have begun to be aware of church member burnout. I have seen church members plunge into church work with the greatest enthusiasm and later drop out. Clergy contribute to the burnout because we have found someone who will say yes to our requests to serve on every kind of committee. But the noise and activity of working for God's Kingdom is exhausting. Douglas Johnson, in his book, "The Care and Feeding of Volunteers," said that members need "rest periods." Members need to be about "wasting time for God" said Bill Clemmons my professor of spiritual formation. We need to live again out of the quiet center of our beings.

Personally, sometimes I don't want to be quiet. I want noise. During his lectures on interpersonal communication, Dr. Dean Fowler said that about 75% of Americans are extraverted while it is the opposite for other cultures. Extroverts like myself draw energy through interaction with people. Extroverts thus have well developed social skills, therefore, they, I mean we, are a noisy bunch. However, on the negative side, psychologists point out that extroverts generally lack inner depth.

Introverts, on the other hand, are not very social but are filled with inner depth since they draw their energy from within

themselves. Introverts can meditate in silence for hours, while the extrovert is uncomfortable after five seconds of silent prayer during worship.

Why do we get so uncomfortable when things get quiet?
Thomas Merton could have an answer.

“Those who love their own noise are impatient of everything else ... They bore through silent nature in every direction with their machines, for fear that the calm world might accuse us of our emptiness ... pretending to have purpose.”

Our love for noise and activity is just a way for us to reflect purpose and cover up our own emptiness. T. S. Elliot describes our culture when he writes, "Where shall the world be found, where will the word resound? Not here, there is not enough silence." We need to walk beside the still waters so that God can restore our souls.

I am not saying that noise and activity is evil. Just as there is "a time to keep silence" and "a time to speak."(Ecc.3:7) Why?

THE POSITIVE FORCE OF SILENCE

It was in the silence and solitude of the cave that God coaxed Elijah out of his black mood. Elijah's strength began to return. He went on to Mt. Horeb. Here on this mountain, in the mystery of silence, he was healed of his hopelessness.

A. As the passage indicates, God was not in the power of nature nor was He in the roar of the fire. After the fire there was a hush, "a sound of gentle stillness." A quietness so quiet you could almost hear it. In that silence, there came a "still small voice" and Elijah fell on his face.

Silence within and without is the condition of true, intelligent, receptive listening. In the cave, Elijah listened for God and found Him in the silence. Thus, if we are to enjoy and grow from the silence, we have to be a silent listener. A Bishop once said that "one should not speak if it is possible to keep silent."(p.95) If one wants to capture the grandeur of a piece from Mozart or any of the great composers, we have to be in silence.

How then are we to listen? If we are to keep the gospel in our heart, if we are to write it on our minds. Listen? Might we listen like the accused about to hear the verdict which will mean life or death? For a moment one sits on the edge of the seat, daring not to breathe. In our hearts, we say, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth."

Silence, too, is a necessary condition of true contemplation. Contemplation that brings one into oneness with God. Elizabeth O'Conner in her book "Search for Silence," said that "the one journey that ultimately matters is the journey into the place of stillness deep within one's self. To reach that place is to be home; to fail to reach it is to be forever restless. At the place of central silence, one's own life and spirit are united with the life and Spirit of God." (5)

I know humans are not part of the plant kingdom, but have you noticed that even though a plane flies overhead or that cars move noisily down the highway; the apple tree, the pear tree, or any fruit tree will bring forth her blossoms and her fruit in silence. Jesus knew this when he stayed forty days in the wilderness to prepare for his ministry.

B. However, I have to be honest with you, there is another side to silence when we observe the stages of our physical lives. In the introduction to this sermon, I illustrated the joy of silence whenever parents are able to silence their active children for even ten minutes. Funny thing about parenting, as parents, we spend considerable energy attempting to quiet our children. With eyes sparkling with wonderment and awe of life and the universe, our children ask one question after another. But we want them to be quiet so we can watch the evening news.

As a parent who is about to send the last child off to college, I wish I had another chance to answer their questions. I wish I could relive even one day when two boys, coated with red Georgia clay, would run screaming and yelling into the house asking their mother "What's for supper?" (Not, "What's for dinner?") I wish I had one more opportunity to break up a fight when sibling rivalry broke out. There would be more concern for justice than for quiet. Maybe, if there had been a peaceful spiritual silence within me, I could have handled those events creatively.

On this day, we remember our mothers. The syndicated writer, Lewis Grizzard, just published a book (no accident that it was just published) which expresses the longing of many: "Don't Forget to Call Your Mama: I Wish I Could Call Mine." On the other hand, there are mothers who would like their children to break into their silent loneliness with a visit or a phone call. They would like to hear the words, "I love you, mom."

I feel sad about leaving First Church because I will not be able to hear your voices and see your faces every Sunday. There will be times in the days ahead when I will wish for that opportunity, but there will only be silence. Yet, even in that silence, God can speak to you and to me.

CONCLUSION

God is above and beyond man's world of space and time. Yet he makes His presence known. Elijah experienced God's presence in the silence of the cave and his soul was restored to new life. May you take time to hear the "sound of gentle stillness that Elijah heard." Give yourself permission to waste time for God so that you may hear the "still small voice" of God. May your faith be resurrected with new freshness and vitality.

God bless you, one and all. I thank you for all that you are. I thank you for sharing your lives with me. I love you. Amen.

NOTES

Thomas Merton, *No Man Is An Island*, (New York: Image Books, 1967) p. 192.

William Clemmons, *Discovering the Depth*, (Nashville; Broadman Press, 1976) p. 21.

Elizabeth O'Conner, *Search for Silence*, (New York; Harper and Row, Pub., Inc.)

PASTORAL PRAYER: "What To Pray For"

May 12, 1991

Dear God, our Friend, and source for new zest and energy. We long to hear your still small voice and sense the warmth of your presence. Help us to clear away the distractions of vanity which separate us from you. Sweep the houses of our minds clean that we

might gain a fresh perspective as to the way to live a truly zestful life. Prepare us to receive that telegram that is meant for us alone.

What we have asked for just now is honorable for it is our intention to serve you in a real way. But what you usually hear from us is a long diatribe of what we want. We are experiencing a crisis and so we have a list that could be compared to a shopping list. What we want is for you to remove the bitter cup from us just as Jesus prayed. But, unlike Him, we are unwilling to pray "Thy will be done as it is in heaven."

Even when we pray an intercessory prayer, you can see through the implications. We pray that you will bless others, our country, and heal our land and guide our leaders. Lord, you see our wish that prosperity will trickle down to us.

So, dear Friend, we ask you this morning, "What do you wish from us?" "What is the call that you have on the remainder of our physical lives?"

There is so much to do. Children who need to have their eyes opened to the spiritual dimensions of life. There are people who are lonely and who are grieving the loss of a loved one. If they just had someone to talk to. An elderly mother sits alone in an institution and needs a kind word. There are those who are alienated from their true selves and from You.

So many needs in creation helps us to hear your call and be willing to say, "Here I am Lord, send me." Thank you, Lord, for listening. Amen.