

The Sounds of Silence

Sermon by Audette Fulbright

Sunday, August 13, 2017

All Souls Church, New York City

I've spent a lot of this past week worrying and wondering about you. I don't know you quite well enough yet to know how you've been handling the nuclear brinksmanship with North Korea, or the disconcerting reality of a government working hard to distance itself from the words of its leader. I'm not sure how you're reacting to the horror of neo-Nazis marching boldly with torches in Virginia, or the deaths that were the poisoned fruit of that hatred. I'm not sure. But I imagine you are like Unitarian Universalists across the country whose reactions and suffering I have shared; you are scared, angry, confused, worried, maybe even numb.

So it's good you're here today. Church is the place for the sin-sick soul – and that goes double for the souls who are sick of sin! Yes, we could parse the word “sin” for a year or more, but this morning, understand it in its poetry and power – the presence of that which is not right; that which hurts us, deforms our love, wears us down and separates us from one another. That is sin. That is what we are suffering from... a separation from love, from clarity, from compassion. Not personally – collectively. We need a balm for the sin-sick soul of our nation.

I don't have that miracle in my pocket. I wish I did. All I can offer is something more personal, for you, for the collective “us” gathered here this morning. Maybe that will be enough, for today.

Silence. In a way, the mere concept is an anomaly in our contemporary lives. In modern New York City, for example, we are never far from the sounds of road noise, construction or conversation. I know when I seek to have some quiet for writing, I have to put on “white noise” to cover other sound. Silence is hard to come by.

And yet, silence is healing – quite literally. Guy Burgs, a well-known meditation and silent retreat leader, says, ““It works like a detox,” explained Burgs. “As soon as you stop bombarding the body with new stuff, it's able to start clearing out the accumulated toxins. The mind works the same way. One of the reasons we seek stimulation is because we don't want to be with how we feel.”

He adds this metaphor for how the mind, lacking silence, experiences the world: Imagine a reflection of the moon in a lake that is heavily disturbed, full of ripples and waves. If you didn't know it was the reflection of the moon, it would look nothing like the moon, Burgs says. “If we try to understand reality through a mind that is constantly disturbed, we continue to get a distorted sense of what is actually going on, which is why just trying to work it out in our heads doesn't always work.”

Burgs recommends silence and meditation as essential tools in healing our minds and becoming rooted again in our fully humanity.

The poet and prophet Kahlil Gibran said, of speaking:

*You talk when you cease to be at peace with your thoughts.
And when you can no longer in the solitude of your heart you live in your lips,
and sound is a diversion and pastime.
And in much of your talking, thinking is half murdered.*

Blaise Pascal put it bluntly, as well. “All of humanity’s problems stem from [our] inability to sit quietly in a room alone.”

Silence. Quite literally, our brains and bodies heal and are renewed in silence. The cultivation of a practice in which we can be silent together and alone is one of the single most restorative, transformational and healing things we can do. Each of us can be blessed by more silence.

One of the most powerful experiences I had when I was in seminary at Starr King was a silent dinner meditation. A group of twenty or more of us gathered at the school for the experience. We chatted in an ordinary way as we gathered in the kitchen prepared our plates, caught up with one another and thanked our facilitators for their prep work. Then we took our plates into the dining area, and sat down to begin our silence.

The dinner was not just ‘eat in silence.’ There was a practice to guide it. Lift the fork, take a bite. Place the fork down on the table. Chew your food thoroughly; try to experience the taste, the texture, the act of chewing and swallowing. After each bite, a sip of water. Only then pick up the fork, take another bite.

At first it was almost an agony of awkwardness. Everything from trying to remember to put the fork down, to chew thoroughly, to sip water after each bite. But far more to sit in silence with other companions, no conversation. We avoided eye contact; I know I was self-absorbed to an alarming degree.

But after a few minutes, maybe three, not many, that all fell away. The practice of fork, chew, experience, sip... the experience of silence together... it was so powerful. The awkwardness disappeared. The power of the present moment exerted itself. The silence, though broken by small, ordinary sounds, was extraordinary.

Mother Theresa said, “We need to find God, and [God] cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature – trees, flowers, grass – grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence... We need silence to be able to touch souls.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. also had some words on silence. He said, “In the end, we will not remember the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.” Silence as a spiritual practice may heal, but silence in the face of the powers and principalities of a broken world is a tool of oppression. As Bishop Desmond Tutu said, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of the mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.” Dante Alighieri put it more

starkly, “The hottest places in hell are reserved for those, who, in times of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality.”

Let me hasten to add that as Universalists, we tend not to believe in an ultimate hell, but generally speaking, we are readily able to understand the hell that we create together right here in our own lives when we lose our way, become cruel or tolerate cruelty in others, turn a blind eye to injustice, or center our lives exclusively on ourselves.

All of this is to say that silence is as destructive a force as it is healing. The Buddha would nod knowingly at this; following the Middle Way, we understand that there must be a balance in all things. Like both Jesus and the Buddha, we need to take ourselves away from the noise and be renewed in silence. And like Jesus in the temple of moneychangers, we must cut through the silence, which is the most powerful tool of the oppressor, and speak up, even if our voice shakes.

To refuse to be silent does not always mean to speak. On June 27, 2015, Bree Newsome climbed a flagpole above the state house in Columbia, SC, and removed the Confederate Flag. She was arrested, but thirteen days later on July 10, the flag was permanently retired from flying above the capital. Colin Kaepernick silently took a knee, and began a national conversation. In Chile, during the regime of Pinochet, women danced alone with pictures of their missing loved ones. In 1917, 10,000 Black people marched silently down Fifth Avenue, protesting the lynchings and other violence being directed at them.

We are broken by too much noise and by too much silence when we should speak out. We need the healing restoration of silence to build strong and resilient spirits, and we need to break our silence to create a moral and just world in which to live. These are the sounds of silence - the inner peace and the power of our voice. And in a place like this, a community like All Souls, where together we represent such an incredible wealth of insight, intellect and collective influence, it is even more incumbent upon us to be people of spiritual depth and common purpose.

We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.

In the coming week, may you find your silence and the courage to break your silence, when the world shows you its need.

Amen.