

Mark 9:30-37  
Pentecost Proper 20  
Sept. 20, 2015

## **The Sound of Silence**

In the silence of the night, the young boy Samuel heard God's voice calling him to service as prophet. Job, too, heard God's voice in the silence. Job 4:16.

There is the silence in which we listen to God's voice, and there is the silence we use to avoid listening to God's voice. And there is God's silence.

In (second) Isaiah, God speaks through Isaiah to those who remained in Jerusalem during the exile and engaged in the rituals of the conquerors.

*"Whom did you dread and fear so that you lied, and did not remember me or give me a thought: have I not kept silent and closed my eyes, and so you do not fear me?... I have seen their ways, but I will heal them."* Is. 57:11, 18.

The people forgot about God. But God's silence did not mean that God forgot his people.

In today's Gospel, the disciples respond to Jesus' words with silence. The disciples' silence is the agitated silence of denial, of ignorance, of fear and shame before God.

It is the second time Jesus tells the disciples about the coming betrayal, death and resurrection. They say nothing, they are silent. Then Jesus hears them arguing as they walk to Capernaum. Jesus asks them to explain what they argue about, and the disciples are again, silent.

The disciples' silence is ambiguous. Mark writes that they don't understand what Jesus is talking about and they are afraid. Is that, afraid what the answers will be? Do they fear the truths they might hear? They miss a golden opportunity to ask and to learn – and I can't help wondering, what if a disciple had said then – before the path to Jerusalem was so firmly set– *Betrayal? How? When? By whom?* Would the story be different, what might have happened? By their silence, did they miss the chance to make a difference in the outcome?

Later, when Jesus asks what they argued about as they walked, the disciples shamefacedly remain silent. They know their battle of egos is wrongful.

We often remain silent when our bad behavior is uncovered. We are not brave enough to admit our fault because we fear losing face. And there are times when we remain silent in the face of bad news. We change the subject to divert attention. *"I've been called back for another mamogram, there's a shadow,"* said my friend. Her husband responded, *'ok. I'll go to the store if you won't have time today.'* Neither one said anything further; both were silent – they were not

brave enough to start a conversation that matters about what was to come.

Who could remain silent after viewing the Sept 2 newsphotos of the man carrying the dead Syrian child found on the beach in Turkey ? The toddler, three years old, died along with his mother and sibling, fleeing the violence in their homeland. The world news media, and many of us, assumed this would be a tipping point – a time when the horrors of the reality of more than 800,000 people leaving their homeland would galvanize the world into action. At first, it was. We started the conversation about immigration and welcoming refugees, although not much was said about addressing why these people were forced to leave their homes.

But less than a week later, instead of vocal outrage and compassionate response, there was – the sound of silence.

Perhaps you remember these lines from the Paul Simon song, the *Sound of Silence*:

*I saw ten thousand people, maybe more,  
people talking without speaking,  
people hearing without listening,  
people writing songs that voices never share  
and no one dared disturb the sound of silence.*

Across Europe, the sound of silence is barriers erected, laws of exclusion and quotas, as European countries scramble to protect their borders. To keep people from entering or passing through from Serbia, Hungary erected a 110 mile long wall of rolled wire fence along its border at a cost of \$35 million. As of Friday, immigrants can no longer cross through Croatia – a perilous journey at best because there are more than 50,000 active land mines left over from previous conflicts.

We hear without listening. We talk without speaking. At the same time as we critique Europe's handling of their immigration crisis, our presidential want-a-be's talk about building walls and 'expelling illegals' as their plan for handling immigrants from Central America and Mexico. There is a hubris in our criticisms that suggests we overestimate our importance in the world. I wonder, isn't that a lot like the disciples arguing about who is the greatest?

Where is *our* compassion? No one dares disturb the sound of silence – to be brave enough to start the conversation that matters. If we ask questions, start with dialogue rather than diatribe, it's scary and unpredictable, that's true. Who knows what we might be asked to do if we disturb the silence? Take in an Arab refugee family or three or four here in Anacortes?

According to *The Guardian*, more than 4 million refugees have fled Syria since 2011. According to UNHCR (United Nations refugee organization) one in every 122 humans is now either a refugee, internally displaced or seeking asylum.

Our Skagit newspaper recently explained the difference between immigrants (who leave their homeland for economic reasons) and refugees (who flee for political or religious reasons). Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban relied on that distinction to justify the rolled wire border wall, warning that ‘the vast bulk of the travelers should be treated as illegal immigrants seeking a European standard of living, not war refugees fleeing life-threatening dangers.’

Either way – refugee or immigrant– these are people who need their humanity restored.

Who will break the silence? Who will speak and who will listen? Who will say, the dream of one people cannot be fulfilled at the expense of another?

Placing a child in the disciples midst, and taking the child in his arms, Jesus said,

*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all....Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.*

Welcoming is not merely receiving others across our borders, it is receiving others with compassion, willingly and with joy.

It is culturally easy to be selfish. Let me say that again. It is culturally easy to be selfish. Our politicians debate the possible impact of mass immigration on jobs, wages and the overall economy. There was a report on NPR this morning on refugees in Germany being moved around and not allowed to look for jobs. But, data from past migrations suggests the economic impact is not negative in the long term. When the 1980 Mariel boatlift brought 125,000 Cubans to Florida, the Floridian US-born workers overall did not lose jobs. When Israel had a large influx of Russian immigrants in the early 1990's, the existing workforce experienced an *increase* in wages.

Our Muslim-suspicious are a barrier erected in the wake of 9/11. Many assume that anyone who is Arab is also Muslim. That is not true – as Dale and Deacon Eric will tell you, many of the refugees are the last of the Christians from Iraq and Syria.

Still, we incorporate, albeit unintentionally, the prejudices of others. Even our most liberal stance on Arab – and hispanic – refugees sounds more like suspicious toleration rather than welcome. Suspicious toleration is not welcoming the stranger..

Jesus answered the disciples’ argument by placing a little child in their midst – and on Sept. 2, in ours. The child in our midst was already dead, the victim of civil and religious wars. In the first century and for the most part now, the child is at the bottom of the social order – the child has no status or social standing, is not a contributor to the economic value of a household or community, and carries no prestige or influence. The child is dependent. Jesus says, if you want to be great, you must welcome those who are least, those who *benefit* you the least: you must welcome the

child.

Jesus asks us to welcome the refugees as children. Not for what they might contribute – but because these are children of God. We must not be silent. We must transform our prejudices with a deeper understanding of the spirituality of welcome. The anti-immigration, anti-Muslim walls must come down.

A shift in focus, but related topic: It has been 66 years since the creation of the State of Israel, and 47 years since the occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza by the Israelis. Many of us choose to remain silent in the face of the tragedy of the Palestinian people and the need for an ecumenical solution that promotes peace with justice. Perhaps our silence is ignorance, or fear of learning the depths of the tragedy and violence.

In response to the US legislative acceptance of the nuclear treaty with Iran, (a treaty which Israel lobbied against) Israel is now demanding more weapons from the US, some \$45 billion worth. How will those weapons be used?

This next week is designated a World Week for Peace in Palestine-Israel, an annual initiative of the World Council of Churches. The theme is “God has broken down the dividing walls”. It is an opportunity for prayer, to speak out against the oppression of one people by another. The Jerusalem prayer, published by the World Council of Churches is in your bulletin and the e-news. Christ Church has a partner relationship with the Anglican/Episcopal Church of Emanuel, in Ramleh, Israel. We pray weekly for their congregation, Christian Arabs living in Israel. They live in a land of barriers. Check points and walls separate Palestinian from Israeli, Arab from Jew. The Israeli countryside and Palestinian farmlands are bisected by roads reserved for Israelis only. Like the Syriac Christians and refugees in Iraq, the Christians in Israel and occupied Palestine are discouraged, they feel forgotten by their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Fr. Fanous, rector of the Emanuel Church, asks that we visit them. They are not English speaking, Ramleh is an industrial town that is not on the pilgrim paths through the Holy Lands. They, too, need encouragement, the presence of Christians who know of their hardships and pray for them. I hope, over the year to come, we will give serious consideration to sending a few compassionate members of this congregation to visit Ramleh.

Which speaks louder, our silence or our action? When does our silence become complicity? By our silence, we miss the opportunity to make a difference in the outcome. We can speak out at demonstrations, meetings, on social media. We can speak against hate and prejudice, regardless of our political views. We can speak in favor of humanitarian response in place of barriers.

This is a moment of opportunity – for our nation, for our community– to see the face of God in others and welcome them. It is a sacred opportunity to break the silence. We cannot pick up a child in Jesus name when our arms are full of prejudices and fears.

Welcoming migrants and refugees is not about economics, or asylum. It is about receiving the

least of them as we would receive God in our midst.

Amen.

Diane Ramerman

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