

“Beautifully Unspoken”

Rev. David Gregory

October 18, 2020

Pentecost 20



Readings

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven . . .
a time to keep silence and a time to speak.

Ecclesiastes 3:1,7

from the *New Revised Standard Version*

One of the tasks of true friendship is to listen compassionately and creatively to the hidden silences. Often secrets are not revealed in words; they lie concealed in the silence between the words or in the depth of what is unsayable between two people.

In modern life there is an immense rush to expression. Sometimes the quality of what is expressed is superficial and immensely repetitive. A greater tolerance of silence is desirable, and is the source of our most resonant language.

An excerpt from *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*

by John O'Donohue

We look forward each week to sharing something helpful and inspiring as we navigate together through a year that we can all agree has been like no other. Our hope is that you and those you love are safe and well, and that you're finding comfort in your connections with others as well as your own spiritual practices. This is the real reason that we are here, to provide a strong sense of community that can bridge the gaps caused by physical and social distance. We've also created plenty of online experiences to enhance our spiritual practices, knowing how essential it is for us to remain rooted and grounded in these trying times.

It's an angry world out there right now, and it's easy to get caught in the webs of polarization that keep us frustrated, unsettled, or anxious. We are in one of history's noisiest moments, and with the volume up so high right now, it might seem strange to offer today an invitation to silence, but that is indeed what we intend to do.

“Silence is golden,” says the universal proverb, but I fear we have lost sight of its true value. In the midst of such vitriolic debate and disagreement, silence may feel too much like surrender. We may fear that if our voice is not loud enough or dominant enough, it will never be heard. There is indeed a time to speak up and let your voice be heard. Ancient Hebrew wisdom teaches us this. But the same tradition also tells us there is a time to keep silence, and for those who can discern the difference, silence can be the most coherent and the most effective language of all.

We’ve all had the experience of being in conversation with some dear soul or other who appears not to be listening at all, but rather using the time that we are speaking to compose what they’re going to say next. This cannot be described as dialogue. It is monologue disguised as dialogue. You can try to stand your ground if you want to, but in the end it will be pointless. We’ve also all had the experience of talking with someone who simply cannot allow a moment of silence to pass without filling it with words. The words themselves are inconsequential, except to provide cover for those who find silence excruciatingly uncomfortable.

Several years ago in Kingston New York I was part of a group practice called “Contemplative Dialogue.” Perhaps you’ve heard of it or experienced something like it. The group I was in was led by a therapist who saw great value in it, and as a spiritual director, I found it so helpful that it became a regular part of my own toolbox. It was a gathering of four or five people, most of whom were experienced meditators. After an opening silence of about five minutes, an excerpt from a spiritual teacher was read aloud, followed by another five minutes of silence. At that point the dialogue began, but instead of a typical conversation, we were speaking from our own souls without speaking to anyone else in the room. We did not make eye contact. Each person was fully heard with no interruption. Between speakers there was a space of silence. We did not answer one another, correct one another, teach one another, or argue with one another. It was an opportunity to speak and to listen without engagement, to let both the words and the silences become equally our good friends. At the appointed time, a final silence was observed. I always emerged from these experiences fully refreshed and alive. There was no agenda other than for everyone to feel fully expressed and completely heard. Perhaps our presidential candidates could try it sometime. . . .

The late John O’Donohue in his classic work *Anam Cara* expresses what we mean when he writes of the “immense rush to expression” that typifies modern life. Perhaps we have the conviction that what we have to say to the world is so urgent and indispensable that we must say it as soon as possible, to as many people as possible, in the highest volume possible. Pols, pundits, and preachers are the ones most often called on doing this, and with good reason. Somebody somewhere convinced us that our job in life is to be so profound that this cable news show, this stump speech, or this very next sermon will be *the* change the world is needing. The result, as O’Donohue tells us, is “superficial and immensely repetitive.”

Could we not all learn together to place a value on our words, and a value on our silences? Could we not see the use of words as debits in the bank accounts of life, and silences as deposits? It’s not that you couldn’t spend your words a bit when needed, but it’s also that you shouldn’t waste them or throw them around without consideration. What would happen if we allowed silent spaces in our conversations, in our newscasts or in our prayers? As we mentioned last time, our most effective prayers are the silent ones, or perhaps the ones composed of single words.

Anne Lamott has said that there are really only three prayers you ever need to pray. The first is “Thanks!” The second is “Help!” and the third is “Wow!” You could reach into your own soul at any given moment and see which of those prayers calls to you the most. These three prayers could form the basis of a whole new liturgy grounded in the economy of words. We could also think about an ecology of words, understanding that like the creation all around us, words are not an unlimited resource. Seeing them in that context might change the way we throw them around so casually, leaving a landscape littered with anger and hurt. In some of the earliest writings of the New Testament era, we hear these words from the Epistle of James:

*The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.
How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!
And the tongue is a fire.*

*The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body,
sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.*

*For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has
been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full
of deadly poison.*

James, why don't you tell us how you really feel! These words may be hyperbolic, but they simply highlight their converse which is the beautiful language of what has the good fortune to remain unspoken among us, or what John O'Donohue has called the most effective language of all.

During the time of this pandemic, my relative sanity has been greatly enhanced by the walking and hiking that I try to do each day. In the early days of the lockdown, I would venture out into nature with my iPhone and Air-pods, my Audible app brimming with books I wanted to listen to, or podcasts on a variety of topics, some spiritually uplifting and others not so much. Lately though, I just turn off all these devices. I am finding that the silence is golden, and that the birds have more to say to me than all the authors in the world. I used to think it was the walking that was keeping me sane, but I'm starting to think it's the silence instead.



The Presence in the Midst
Doyle Penrose