

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
September 20, 2009
Mark 9:30-37
“Breaking the Silence”

Dickens wrote a book called “A Tale of Two Cities.” Mark’s gospel lesson for today could well be called “A Tale of Two Silences.” Listen as this ancient-yet-ever-new story is told once again. *Jesus and his disciples passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.* (Mark 9:30-32)

Jesus and his disciples were passing through Galilee, the northern part of Herod’s kingdom that contained the cities of Nazareth, Jesus’ hometown, and Capernaum, Peter and Andrew’s hometown. But Jesus didn’t want to attract attention to himself, because he was busy teaching his disciples. It wasn’t a time for crowds, but rather for his fledgling congregation. And Jesus wasn’t mincing words with them, telling them how the Son of Man would be betrayed, killed, and then rise again. Then comes Silence #1: The disciples didn’t understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

You all know Abraham Lincoln’s famous line about how it is better to be silent and thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt. At first glance, the disciples appear to be dense schoolchildren, unsure what their teacher is talking about yet afraid to seem foolish by asking questions for clarification. On one level, we tend to excuse the disciples for their thick-headedness because the things Jesus was talking about were so hard to imagine. Why would this teacher and miracle worker be betrayed, arrested and killed? Other rabbis lived to ripe old ages; why shouldn’t Jesus continue to preach and teach for years to come? But on a deeper level, we cannot dismiss the important detail that the disciples were afraid to ask more of Jesus, likely because they knew in their guts what his answer would be. Let’s say Andrew had raised his hand and asked the question that was weighing on everyone’s mind: *Rabbi, if your teachings lead to such acts of violence, and we are your followers, should we expect the same violent reactions?* To which I can imagine Jesus would have nodded his head in reply. This is not pure speculation on my part, for in John’s gospel Jesus says point-blank, *If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you...If they persecuted me, they will persecute you.* (Jn 15:18, 20b) I think Silence #1 emerged because the disciples were afraid to hear Jesus’ answer to the question about their immediate future.

Mark’s story continues: *Then they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.* (Mark 9:33-34) Don’t you hate it when you’re having a secret conversation and someone, who you didn’t want to hear what you were saying, breaks in and asks “What were you talking about?” Either you say, “Oh, nothing” which is seldom believed, or you try to change the subject, which seldom works, or you tell a lie, which usually makes things worse. Jesus modeled for his disciples a life of selflessness, of concern for the outcast and marginalized. Yet on the road to Peter’s

house, they had been arguing over status, about who was the greatest. It was a stupid argument, revealed as such as soon as Jesus asked about their private conversation. They couldn't imagine how to put their petty argument into words for their teacher, so out of embarrassment they fell into Silence #2 - although their silence spoke volumes.

The first silence was a silence of denial – I don't want to hear the hard truth so I simply won't ask the question. The second silence was a silence of shame – I don't want to admit out loud what I am thinking so I simply won't answer the question. A tale of two silences. Think of the times you've fallen silent for some of these same reasons. Robert Fulghum tells the story of a doctor who discovered he had terminal cancer. He fully understood his prognosis, but he didn't want his family and friends to suffer, so he kept the disease secret and he died. Some people said how brave he was to bear his suffering in silence, but his family and friends were angry that he didn't feel he could confide in them; that in effect he'd acted as if he didn't need them and hadn't allowed them to offer their love and strength in his time of decline.¹

Now a different model. This past week a group of Fed-Ex workers gathered in our church to volunteer for the East End Cooperative Ministry. They re-painted an office used by the Men's Shelter and did other good deeds in the neighborhood. As they began their day, one of the EECM staff members named Pam told her story. She supervises a program for helping single women get off the streets, and she is good at her job because she herself had been homeless, had abused drugs and alcohol, and had lost her family and self-esteem. One of her most poignant comments was when she said, "Look, no one wakes up in the morning and says 'I've decided to be an addict; I've decided to be an alcoholic.'" However it happens, the slide into addiction is usually subtle and incremental, dependent on the two silences of denial and embarrassment. Ray Anthony, a church member here and frequent attendee at our Good Samaritan service, just last Sunday told how after being clean for over 10 years, sometimes in his dreams he can remember the pull of his crack addiction. He imagined being with the old gang and being offered drugs, and doing the mental math of an addict – how I've got \$70 in my pocket, which \$20 can pay for one hit now and \$20 will be used later, because you always need a second hit, but that I'll save \$30 for food or rent and I'll be alright – even though you never save the \$30 and you're never alright. Pam and Ray broke the silence by acknowledging their own troubled pasts, and by sharing how faith and community got them to solid ground at last. As any 12-Step program will tell you, admitting the truth out loud within a community that cares is the best path to recovery.

Let's finish our gospel story. After the first silence, when Jesus told about the suffering he would endure, and the second silence, when he asked the disciples to acknowledge their shallow argument over who was to be the greatest, we are told this: *Jesus sat down* (that is, he assumed the teaching position of a rabbi), *he called the twelve and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."* (Mark 9:35-37)

Notice what Jesus doesn't do. He doesn't chide the disciples for their silence. He doesn't rebuke them for worrying about status and fame despite how he had continually modeled

for them the example of servant leadership – by healing the blind man, the leper, the woman with the flow of blood. You can't draw people out of their silences with words. You draw them out with living parables, with lives of quiet witness. It is the friend who has proven her worth by being there through thick and thin to whom you can admit your secret faults. It is around those we trust that we lower our masks and admit out loud what must be spoken if it is to be healed. At some point, everyone of us has to say to someone else, "I need help. I'm an addict; I've been abused; I've been an abuser; I've stolen, I've lied, I'm so afraid." Ideally this church is a place to nurture these relationships – as we trust others to pray for us and those we love, as we say our silent confessions, as we seek anointing and cleanse our souls of secret sins, as we stop trying to be perfect for God alone is perfect. This is what is offered here.

But remember what Jesus did. He brought forward a child. Back in biblical times, children were the lowest status members of any household. Jesus held a child and said, "Welcome a child in my name and you welcome me and the Lord God who sent me." Suddenly everything is turned upside down; life's hierarchy of power is flipped on its head. The first shall be last and servant of all. By giving loving attention to the least in the world means we become equal to the least in the world, which paradoxically transforms us into the forefront of what it means to live into the realm of God.

Or put it this way: The novelist Alice Walker once said, "The fundamental question of life is 'Why is the child crying?'"² If at the heart of all your actions is an attempt to answer the questions, "Why is the child crying? Why are children uncared for, abandoned, in need and afraid?" would that not be a life well led? Would that not be a life of faith? Would that not be a worthy goal for the G-20 leaders to take to heart? Would that not re-prioritize our national interests and international affairs? Would that not incarnate the passion and love of the Christian gospel?

This is not being poetic. This is being prophetic. For too long we have been silent on something as straightforward and compelling as children's tears being shed here and around the world. Tears shed from hunger, from abuse, from war and violence and fear. "Why is the child crying?" is the inverse to Jesus' commandment "Whoever wants to be first must be last and servant of all." Both lead along the path of life-giving faith.

What silence must be broken in your life today? Imagine even one silence you can break today – through a word to someone else, an apology, a letter advocating change, a confession, a silent prayer, a vow that you share with someone who will hold you accountable, a deed that wipes away a child's tears. It is often a little thing, but it can be life-transforming. For the Son of Man did suffer and yet overcame suffering with resurrection life. The One who welcomed children also welcomes us, and in that circle of love we encounter the fullness of God who sent Christ and now sends us into the world. It is of this we speak. And sometimes we even use words to break the silence.

AMEN

¹ Quoted by James E. White, *Leadership* Winter 1998, p. 62.

² Alice Walker, [Possessing the Secret of Joy](#)