**Silence**
Stephen Van Kuiken
Community Congregational U.C.C.
Pullman, WA
October 15, 2017

*Our awareness of God is a syntax of the silence in which our souls mingle with the divine, in which the ineffable in us communes with the ineffable beyond us.*
—Abraham Heschel

Ancient Witness: Psalm 46

There’s a recent good book by Phillip Gulley, *The Evolution of Faith*, in which he tells a story about a teenage boy’s experience with organized religion. His parents belonged to a denomination that practiced confirmation for its children. At the age of 12, each child went to confirmation classes, and at the end of these classes, the children would stand in front of the entire congregation on a Sunday morning. And so this boy was told to memorize some very specific answers to these questions that were given to him by the confirmation teacher.

Soon the Sunday arrived for the boy to stand with the other children in front of the congregation, and the boy told the teacher that he had some doubts about some of the answers. “Say them anyway,” his teacher told him.

Now the boy felt uncomfortable about affirming something he didn’t believe, but he wasn’t sure what to do. So he took his place in line and walked into the sanctuary, and the pastor began asking them the questions, working his way down the row of children.

When the pastor came to the boy, the boy paused, and then said, “Well, I’ll tell you how I see it.” He then proceeded to tell the pastor and congregation, in his own words, what he believed.

This was a first for the pastor, who hesitated but then moved on to the other children in line. And every time it was the boy’s turn to answer, he did the same thing, saying, “Well, I’ll tell you how I see it.” Gulley concludes,

> This is a courage rarely seen in organized religion, especially by one so young, in a religious culture that has emphasized indoctrination over exploration.

> If the church has a future, it will lie in its ability to inspire its members to do what that young boy did—refuse to uncritically accept the settled answers of the past, resist the pressure to conform, and revere the continued search for meaning.

There are many who think that faith is something that can be enforced, and they’d rather have obedient children than authentic adults who take responsibility for their faith journey.

My view is that God is honored by a spirit of exploration, by an honest search for communion.

And so, today I want to talk about having direct contact with God. Real, first-hand experience. Not only is this possible, but this is actually central to what Jesus was about as a teacher. Jesus taught that
this direct contact with God can renew and transform our lives. It can give us a joy like no other joy. It can give us peace and courage and compassion.

It is like experiencing the glory of the sunrise on a mountain top. People can describe it to you, write books about it, paint pictures of it, but it is just not the same. The beauty and the majesty just have to be felt. And this is what Jesus and many of the spiritual masters were about. They said, “Look, you’ve got to see this for yourself! I can tell you about it, but what you’ve really got to do is to climb the mountain yourself.” Sadly, there is too much religion that discourages this – authoritarian – they say, “We have the answers! ‘and not “Come and see!”’

And when I say, “contact with God,” maybe I should clarify. God is always in contact with us. I’m talking about becoming aware of God’s contact with us. I remember how Andrew Greeley once put it. He said that everyone has experiences of God. The job of the preacher is not to give someone a God-experience; it is to call to the surface those experiences people already have.

And these experiences of God that we have are beyond words and thoughts and images. And so we can become aware of them not with our mind or intellect, but with what the great tradition calls our “heart.” Words and thoughts and images can take us so far, but when we want to climb to the mountain and see the sunrise for ourselves, we need to leave them behind.

Is this possible? Can we really have direct contact with God? Can we really remove those things that stand between us and God, which impede and block our awareness? Jesus said, “of course!” God or God’s realm is within us and among us. It is right under our noses – there for us to experience if we learn to open our eyes and ears and heart to it.

There’s an old saying that goes,

I used to be stone deaf. I would see people stand up and go through all kinds of gyrations. They called it dancing. It looked absurd to me – until one day I heard the music!

Often, we are amazed and cannot understand why saints and prophets behave the way they do. So we wait for our hearts to come alive. We wait to hear the music.

This is what prayer and contemplation is about – hearing the music. But how does one do this? There is so much noise, so many thoughts going through our heads, so many concerns and worries, so many feelings and emotions within us. How can we turn down the volume and hear the music?

Anthony de Mello tells a story:

A Jesuit friend once told me that he approached a Hindu guru for initiation in the art of prayer. The guru said to him, “Concentrate on your breathing.” My friend proceeded to do just that for about five minutes. Then the guru said, “The air you breathe is God. You are breathing God in and out. Become aware of that and stay with that awareness.”

This is an important teaching that is in every religious tradition. It is that by attaining an inner silence there is a pathway to God. By looking beyond our thoughts and attending to the present moment we can hear the music. By observing our breath, the sensations of our arms and legs and body, this can help lead us down a path where we can glimpse that magnificent sunrise that is all around us.
Let me briefly add that this is easier said than done! Sometimes the traditions use the phrase, “Spiritual Discipline,” which hints at the time and effort and energy and patience that is required. Spiritual awareness is not something someone else can give us. We cannot buy it. One needs to experience it for oneself. One needs to climb the mountain for oneself. And that requires effort. Learning to attain an inner silence does not come naturally. But each tradition talks about it. The Jewish tradition that Jesus was in talked about it.

Psalm 46 has these famous words about how “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” It goes on to say how this presence that is right here, right now is eternal, unshakable, unmovable. And it is transforming the universe:

- God makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
- God breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;
- God burns the chariots with a fire!

And then it concludes:

- Be still, and know that I am God.

You want to experience this transforming presence? You want to feel this unshakable Reality? You want to know this refuge and strength and help that is right here, right now? Shhhh. Be still. Attain an inner silence.

The great scholar and prophet, Abraham Heschel, wrote,

- Our awareness of God is a syntax of the silence in which our souls mingle with the divine, in which the ineffable in us communes with the ineffable beyond us.

Many, many others talk about silence as a pathway to God, to healing, wholeness and peace. The poet Rumi wrote:

- Silence is the language of God,
  all else is a poor translation.

Attaining stillness and touching silence, however, doesn’t come easily. There is a strong resistance within us. We live in a culture that doesn’t appreciate silence very much. We are uncomfortable with it. So a lot of what I’m saying here is counter-cultural. Even our worship we fill up with words and talking. We do better than most with only two minutes of silence. But only two. This is why during the act of communion, I prefer to be in silence or sing or chant. Don’t get me wrong, thinking and words are important, but their whole purpose here, it seems to me, is to lead us to silence and an inner stillness.

But if we can get beyond the initial boredom and restlessness of silence, we can discover that this silence is really filled with a heavenly music. And what seems to be empty and nothingness is really filled with the presence of God.

Isaac of Nineveh, a seventh century Syrian monk, spoke of the spiritual pathway of silence:

- More than all things, love silence: it brings you a fruit that tongue cannot describe. In the beginning, we have to force ourselves to be silent. But then there is born something that draws
us to silence. May God give you an experience of this “something” that is born of silence. If only you practice this, untold light will dawn on you in consequence...

But as I said, this is much easier said than done. In his book, *Sadhana: A Way to God*, de Mello wrote this:

*To silence the mind is an extremely difficult task. How hard it is to keep the mind from thinking, thinking, forever thinking, forever producing thoughts in a never-ending stream. Our Hindu masters in India have a saying: one thorn is removed by another. By this they mean that you will be wise to use one thought to rid yourself of all the other thoughts that crowd into your mind. One thought, one image, one phrase or sentence or word that your mind can be made to fasten on. For to consciously attempt to keep the mind in a thoughtless state, in a void, is to attempt the impossible. The mind must have something to occupy it. Well, then give it something with which to occupy itself – but just one thing.* (p.28)

Some people assume that to attain this inner silence of the mind that one must be in an absolutely quiet setting with no physical sounds. But this is a misunderstanding. Outer silence is not the same as inner silence. Again, de Mello writes,

*If you learn to take all the sounds that surround you into your contemplation you will discover that there is a deep silence in the heart of all sounds…*

*Sounds are distracting when you attempt to run away from them, when you attempt to push them out of your consciousness, when you protest that they have no right to be there…*

*If you just accept them and become aware of them you will find them not a source of distraction and irritation but a means for attaining silence.* (p.43)

This is true not just for external sounds, but I think this is true for the noises that are within us – all the emotions, feelings and thought going on. They become more distracting the more we try to push them out. It takes practice to just be aware of them, accept them and not allow them to distract or overwhelm us. “You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.”

A friend had a tag line on their email by Robert Lewis Stevenson that I really like:

*Quiet minds cannot be perplexed or frightened but go on in fortune or misfortune at their own private pace,*
*like a clock during a thunderstorm.*

Isn’t that a great image? There can be external silence but a lot of internal noise, and there can be a lot of external chaos and storminess but an inner silence.

John Kabat-Zinn wrote about the observance of a moment of silence on September 11, 2002, the one-year anniversary of the terrorist attack. “Silence,” he wrote, “is the ultimate prayer.”

*We call a moment of silence an observance. How appropriate. It is falling into the present moment with awareness and an openness of heart that allows for all our feelings, speakable and unspeakable, reconciling and vengeful, hopeful and despairing to just be there. It is a moment of*
pure being. It is also a nod to something deep within ourselves that we touch only briefly and then shy away from... (p. 574, Coming to Our Senses)

There is a deep silence in the heart of all sounds, all things, all people. And when we reach this, we can hear the music.

In the Book of Wisdom it says,

*When night in its swift course had reached its half-way point and deep silence embraced everything the eternal Word leaped from the Heavenly throne.*

When we are embraced by deep silence, the eternal Word is spoken. When we hear the music of silence, we experience the divine life-breath of the universe.

This is part of the wisdom of the ages. As Elijah discovered, when we stop running away from external things that are pursuing us; when we accept the sounds that are within us – our thoughts, our fears, our anger, our assumptions; when we attain an inner silence; then out of that stillness, that sheer silence a voice emerges. It is a small voice that has been there all along – the life-giving voice of God.

This small silent voice can give us a magnificent perspective, and each Sunday I may even tell you what I think it might be saying. (I have a lot of nerve, don’t I!) But please don’t take my word for it or anyone else’s. Let’s be still and hear and see it for ourselves.

*(NOTE: The spoken sermon, available online and on CD at the church, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)*