
Silence Is God's First Language

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Lent 2 – Year B**

Unedited transcript:

I love words. I love thinking about how words are spelled. I love learning about where words came from. I love people who are artful in their construction of sentences with words.

I've had the privilege of spending time this week with my nine-year-old step stepson, reviewing his homework. His mother's had a lot of evening meetings, and I've been amazed as I'm reminded of words. Words that are spelled the same, but mean different things. Words that are spelled differently, but mean the same things. I'm amazed I ever got through school, but I am fascinated with words.

Of course, sometimes I can get carried away with my fascination with words. I can't remember what it was about, but I do distinctly remember energetically engaging my wife, trying to make some kind of point, really coming close to what I thought was the answer, when she looked up at me and she said, "George, just stop talking."

Words are helpful, sometimes silence is helpful too. I bet Peter got a lesson in this. Here's Jesus saying, "Who do they say that I am?" And Peter, almost, you can almost feel him jumping up in the front row, raising his hand. "You are the Messiah."

"Right," Jesus says, Peter got the right answer. He had the right words. But it's not too long after that when Jesus starts predicting his own suffering and death and Peter rebukes him, an interesting word. Peter rebukes him, and Jesus rebukes Peter, "Get behind me, Satan," he says. "Get behind me, Satan."

Those words are interesting. Again, I bet Peter wishes he had been silent right then. Maybe he could have just held his tongue for a little bit longer, listened, been open, learned something. We can't be too harsh on Peter, of course. Nobody else in the Gospel of Mark seems to understand Jesus or his message or his ministry.

We have just started a second part of the Gospel. Each of the different parts begins with a description of Jesus as the way or defining a way, and then a question, and fundamentally the question is always, do you know what's going on? And the answer is silence, which is the right answer because they did not know what's going on. As wonderful and helpful as words can be, sometimes silence is the better course.

Thomas Keating, the monk who popularized centering prayer, famously said, "Silence is the first language of God." And then of course there's Mother Teresa and her famous, at least to me, wonderful description of prayer as simply listening to God and the silence. "How do you pray?" she was asked by an interviewer. "I just listen to God," she says. "Well, what does God say?" the interviewer quickly responded. "Oh," she said, "he just listens to me."

Silence, there is something in the silence when all of our words have been shelved, at least for a moment. All of the grasping control of our egos that find such a comfortable home in those words have been calmed just for a minute, and there is silence, and yet silence is not absent. Silence is not nothing. Silence is presence, and therein lies the key. Silence is present, but too many words, too much thinking, too much control covers up that presence and narrows our awareness and we can't listen.

Peter had the right words, but when it came time for silence, he didn't have the right practice. And as a result,

he had to go on wrestling with who was Satan and how was he Satan and what did Jesus mean by that and what was going on anyway? Silence was the right answer. Because you see often, as was the case there, the answer is something we've not yet imagined, something we can't really conceive. So bringing forth all of those words that are so precise in the way we use them, that bring forth the richness of past conversations that perpetuate the same old ideas will never lead us to the answer, which we've not been able to imagine.

Silence opens us to what we cannot imagine. Words, even in the best of poetry, struggle to do that. And when they do, if you think about good poetry, it's often the silence between the words, above the words, below the words, beside the words, it's often the silence that create the space for you to imagine something that you had not imagined before.

That's how poetry works. It tells you things that you didn't even want to admit you knew. The Hebrew prophets and scribes and rabbis over time also respected this silence, this space, if you will, between the letters in the margins, the silence in which God spoke and imagination was kindled and new answers were revealed. Peter had the right words, but he didn't have the practice of silence, and as a result, missed the meaning.

I'm thinking, as I tell you about silence and imagining things that we couldn't have imagined without it, of the movement in this country in the 1930s, in the Works Progress Administration. It was an interesting time where the country is recovering from the Great Depression and the government is very active in trying to stimulate patriotism and build community and bring people together and break down all those socioeconomic barriers that invariably stand in the way.

It was an interesting time for pools. It was an interesting time because cities and communities across this country were building pools, pools and zoos and civic centers, which brought people together. And as one writer said, "When you take off all those fancy clothes and you just put on your bathing suit, everybody is the same and community is built."

It was about quality of life. It was about recognizing the dignity of each other. It was about building community. Social melting pots, these community pools were called. A Pennsylvania County recreation director said, "Let's build bigger, better finer pools. That's real democracy. Take away the sham and hypocrisy of clothes, do a swimsuit and we are all the same," he said.

And then we came to the 1950s, where suddenly the integration, where suddenly the issue was the integration of those pools and that symbol of community, that social melting pot, that place where we were stripped naked in our souls and bared to each other went away. And largely across the country, though particularly in the South, cities began closing those pools rather than integrate them. Rather than let black people swim with white people, they closed the pools.

In particular, I'm thinking of Oak Park Pool in Montgomery, Alabama. It was one of those the grandest pools for miles, one of the crown jewels of the Parks Department, and the venue also included a zoo and a community center and it was really the gem of the public works system. But then when the order came down to integrate that pool in the late 1950s, the Parks Department simply closed. They sold off the animals, shuttered the zoo, closed the pool, filled it in, grew grass over the top of it. The entire public works system was actually closed for more than a decade, and even after it reopened, they never built another pool.

Now, this is a story, not just about segregation and it's horrors, it's a story about our inability to be silent and to imagine a different future. The closing of those pools is predictable if you only look at the past and think about all of the words that had been used to describe the races. All of the words that had been used to justify segregation, all of the words that have been used to create a community that couldn't get together without tearing down the structures that had been so carefully built over so many years.

The words couldn't do it, but the silence could. The silence where another person's standing before you and breathing is human. The silence where whatever you have heard from somebody else is not there at the moment. The silence when somehow the connectedness that we feel, the belonging that we experience with another person rises up and makes its presence known.

There was no silence there, was there? Lots of words, increasing in volume, shouting, but no silence, and as a result, no pool. And who suffered for that. The black children and their families who were unable to enjoy this public good suffered, yes. But what about the white people and their families who were using that pool, enjoying that pool, experiencing the community that pool was responsible for generating? They didn't have a pool, either. Some, of course, we're able to pay for private pools, but a large majority simply lost their pool.

Plenty of words, no silence. Without the silence, we filled in the pool and lost it. Even today, as public parks are

once again becoming something people pay attention to, there is an amazing scarcity of pools, pools that are joyful and invigorating and community building. We had too many words and not enough silence and we filled in the pool.

"Who do they say that I am?" Jesus asked. "You are the Messiah," Peter answered. He had the right words, but he didn't know what they meant. He thought he was a military conqueror who would, following the myth of redemptive violence, be able to come in and restore the state of Israel by vanquishing the enemy. That's not who Jesus was. Jesus was the Christ. Jesus was one with God. Jesus was about nonviolence and relationship, even to the cross, where in his trial, he remained silent. There were no words that he could use to explain what people could not imagine. It was the silence that conveyed the meaning.

So would you walk forth into the season of Lent, I invite you to use fewer words. It's not that words are bad. They're wonderful, but they can perpetuate the past in ways that prevent us from imagining what we couldn't imagine before. Put the words aside and invite in the silence. The silence that opens you, the silence that quiet you, the silence that stills you and give space to the presence of God, that will allow you to imagine something as disruptive as integrating a public pool.

I don't know what it is. We haven't imagined it yet, but we can with silence. Through this Lent, I invite you to use fewer words and create space for more silence, where I pray and hope and believe you will experience the presence of God and imagine a future you had not before considered.

Amen.