

Dahill, Lisa E. "Chapter 5: Silence before the Word" In *Truly Present: Practicing Prayer in the Liturgy*, 51-56. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2005. (ISBN 080665147-4)

## Silence before the Word

Silence is invited at various places throughout the service: before the prelude, following the invitation to confession, following each reading and the sermon, during the prayers of intercession and communion, before the benediction. Sometimes, as between "Let us pray" and the prayer that follows, this silence may be simply an extended pause, a holy moment to catch our breath and help each person collectively arrive in the presence of God. At other times, such as following the sermon, we may receive the gift of a minute or more of silence to let the Word reach deep into our hearts and take root there. If we are lucky and in a congregation attuned to the necessity of silence for deepening into God, we will be allowed to experience several or even all of those named above, Sunday after Sunday. In some parishes, however, nervous presiders or musicians rush through these pauses and silences, afraid people will get anxious or bored if nothing seems to be going on.

It is true that the good and fruitful use of silence is an acquired capacity; for most people it does not come naturally. Most of us must learn over time what to do with extended or even short silences in worship, how to let them become openings to deeper prayer rather than dead time. Many parishes find it helpful to make this learning an intentional process for people. This might include regular reference to silence and its fruits in preaching, or classes to teach prayer forms conducive to deepening the use of silence (such as some of those forms detailed in this book), or simply by inviting people into this ongoing liturgical practice of rest together in the word, letting newcomers and children learn from those more experienced with the grace of silence inviting us all into God. However it is done, we truly need these spaces where "nothing" is going on.

We live in a world relentless in its drivenness, its insistence on always pushing ahead to the next new thing, the next stimulation, the next entertainment or achievement. We become dulled to our own interior lives, accustomed to numbing them away with distractions, busyness, media stimulation, or addictions. Feeling pressured to achieve and perform, we resist spending time—even five minutes a day!—in silence with God. It feels like a waste of time, and those unaccustomed to the interior rhythms of worship often expect even liturgy to follow the same rigid hour-long time blocks into which the *TV Guide* has patterned our lives. If we sit in silence for a full minute after the sermon, we might be late getting to brunch! We'll miss the kick-off of the game! So utterly do we program our existence that even a few seconds—let alone an entire minute—of silence with God feels like a violation of our busy schedules.

But the resistance goes deeper. There's a reason we have scheduled ourselves into oblivion, a reason we fill our down time with TV on the couch or talk radio in the car or computer chat rooms at night, alongside regular pursuit of chocolate or alcohol, stimulation or retail consumption or self-improvement. We may complain endlessly about being overworked, and may mean it quite sincerely, yet refuse to create for ourselves even small openings into rest and silence in our busy lives. We may even fill our exercise or dog-walking hours with CDs and headphones to keep from getting "bored" by time spent simply outdoors. This compulsive busyness is a problem not only for adults. Books have been written on the loss of empty spaces even in childhood—those hours of

nothing to do previous generations of children experienced in the interstices of the busiest farm or city family life, where exploration of the surroundings or simple endless day-dreaming gave them regular access to their interior and exterior worlds.

I believe there is a reason for this wholesale withdrawal from the experience of silence in our society—much as we may lament its loss—and that it has to do with resistance to deeper levels of our beings: unwanted feelings, intuitions, desires, or needs. As we saw in the chapter on confession, we are cut off from others, from ourselves, from God, from the earth, and this hurts so profoundly we can't bear to face it. To the extent we are resisting the One who shows up in our depths, we often run from silence as well. The literature on prayer and spiritual growth throughout Christian history is full of examples about the difficulty of sustaining authentic silence—silence encompassing actual emptiness, including space for God—in the midst of nonstop internal chatter and distractions. Of all the practices outlined in this book, it's possible that silence in its various forms is the most difficult for late-modern Western individuals. For this reason I have located it at the center of the book, at its heart. Silence is not the most central practice of prayer and worship; the chapters on word and sacraments describe the ways we most reliably and transparently receive the living presence and love of God in Jesus Christ. But silence—authentic, terrifying emptiness—is a necessary condition for being able to receive these gifts in the first place.

This is not a matter of works-righteousness. I in no way intend to say that the practice of silence is some divine prerequisite establishing our worthiness of grace, nor that those incapable of silence are somehow barred from knowing God or being saved. But just as we find it hard to connect with people who only talk and refuse ever to listen, or who are so busy and active that they never have time to spend with us, so it is with God. Our journey of growth in love includes learning to be ever more fully available to God too—and this simple *availability to God*, rather than any “works,” is the heart of authentic silence. To receive God's word depends on our ceasing to talk (or plug our ears, or otherwise run away) long enough, and deeply enough, to be able to truly *listen* to God. And while strict requirements of fasting before communion are less widely observed than in the past, still receiving the eucharist at the depths God desires to nourish us depends too on being in touch with our deepest hungers, the emptiness at the heart of ourselves—that emptiness we are running from when we fill our-selves with chocolate or overwork. Silence and actually experiencing our own emptiness, our own poverty, can be frightening indeed, at its heart our silence is a way of dropping our defenses and making ourselves utterly available to God.

Thus the practices of silence are essentially quite simple. They are forms by which we grow in availability of the heart. Many classics of Christian spirituality circle around this mystery of learning silence before God. Some writers speak of a way of nothingness, of God's utter ineffability and transcendence of every human category, so that we approach God not solely through words or images, but through the negation of every name, every image of the divine mystery. This tradition seeks to empty the mind and heart of categories which limit the mystery of God. Texts like *The Cloud of Unknowing* manifest this approach. Similarly, texts which deal with “dark night experiences point to the awesome revelation of God in human experience most powerfully *not* in our mountaintop moments but precisely in those experiences of God's apparent absence and our own doubt or feelings of abandonment. St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* is a classic example of this motif, inviting us when these experiences loom in our lives not to flee from them or suppress them but to embrace them as best we can, to let the dark night itself strip us of old,

inadequate conceptions of God and patterns of life. Gradually, mysteriously, often in ways or forms we least expect, we may be opened to new and very different experiences of reality.

Christian texts exploring these motifs center around a third cluster of themes: poverty, emptiness, and humility. We don't necessarily like these themes. Who wants to live in *poverty*? Certainly not those who are themselves poor; and are we not commanded to help them escape their poverty? Similarly, *emptiness* is a condition so unpleasant we avoid it at all costs. Biologically hardwired to fill ourselves whenever food is available, we simply do so, and we let this aversion to emptiness carry over into the internal emotional/psychic arena as well. And *humility* smacks of humiliation. For those already confused about their worth, such as those who have survived trauma, abuse, or violence, the mere mention of humility can evoke a tyrannical God intent on crushing our wills, our individuality, our power.

All these latter themes from Christian tradition have fallen on difficult times in our contemporary milieu. Confrontation with our mortality, our emptiness, our unmet needs threatens to dissolve the false constructs of self and nation and world we think constitute us. And as fragile human beings perhaps we *can't* finally enter the awe-some humility of availability before God on our own. In fact, far from being some kind of "work," perhaps even the capacity for silence is already the fruit of grace stirring in us. Without it we turn away; we rustle our bulletins during tiny pauses in the service, whisper to our neighbors throughout communion. On our own we can't ever fully stop, relax, drop our bulletins, open our hands, and sink into silence. But Jesus can. And he invites us to follow—or, better, to meet him where he already is.

For Jesus is born not only into the ordinariness and excitement of our humanity. He is born into our darkness, into that dark night, that poverty, that emptiness we flee at all costs. Born in the dark, in the cold, in a shack unfit for human habitation, he lives with no place to call home, embraces sinners and outcasts, ends up in a criminal's death and a stranger's tomb, even descending into hell. In him every poverty of our experience is encompassed. In him the darkness is embraced. He is the One in and through whom alone we have the courage to put down our crutch and descend into our own darkness, our emptiness and radical hunger, our mortality, and our own radical availability to God once all the masks and distractions and social roles are stripped away. Baptized and welcomed, confessing and for-given, our hearts opened to praise and love beyond our imaginings, we have the courage in Jesus Christ to enter at last the silence at our center. And there, in utter poverty, we learn that sweetest of all gifts: to cherish the Beloved alone, to depend for our very lives on his leading, to cling to him forever.

## Questions for Reflection/Discussion

1. Do you see out silence, or flee it at all costs? In your experience, does God "live" in silence?
2. Would you appreciate more silence in worship? Less? At what points in particular?
3. Where would you most like or need more silence in your life outside worship?
4. If you generally flee silence in your life, why do you think that is?
5. Have you ever experienced a "dark night" time in your life? Do you have a sense how of where God was in that experience?