

Sermon Series: "Jesus: Give us Prayer"
For the summer (July) of 2010

Sermon #2 – "Let's start with silence...listening, not speaking"

JIM SHORT
Sunday July 4th, 2010
1000hrs

Richard Rohr – "When the church is no longer teaching the people how to pray, we could almost say it will have lost its reason for existence"

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Our first lesson is from Psalm 30:

This individual psalm of thanksgiving for recovery from a nearly fatal illness apparently became a hymn of congregational praise in the temple liturgy. If the superscription is to be believed, it appears to have been used on anniversaries of the rededication of the temple by Judas Maccabeus in 164 BCE. Later Judaism interpreted it as expressing the national experience of survival from imminent disaster.

Despite the psalmist's rejoicing for divine help in time of dire need, he is also conscious of Yahweh's anger at his false overconfidence before he fell sick. Such an attitude comes naturally to anyone who enjoys great success.

We see it exemplified often in persons of wealth and power.

A sense of bargaining with Yahweh enters into the prayer.

The questions are not merely rhetorical. Such a challenge to Yahweh depended on the ancient belief that a god with no one to praise him/her was an extinct deity. That did not occur because the worshiper was saved from death when his repentance brought forth Yahweh's forgiveness and his lament became a song of joyous thanksgiving.

Please turn in your Voices United Hymn Book to page 757. **(Give people time to find the page)**

Jane will play through the refrain once and on the second time through we will sing it.

(Let Jane play the music)

When we get to the places marked r we sing the refrain. The congregation responds with the bolded words.

Lead in the psalm....

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Though there are countless references in the Bible to prayer and people praying. There is not laid out prayer program for people – no "Idiot's or Dummies" Beginning Guide to Prayer.

When the scriptures mention people praying, it does not say whether it is silent or spoken prayer. With our post modern western world sense of always talking, listening in silence to God and others is not something we naturally do.

We are better talkers than listeners.

We are more used to defining prayer as speaking to and with God, often telling God what we want or what God should do.

These following lessons set some of the scene for our journey today into exploring silence in prayer.

The author of the Book of Genesis – the very beginning of the Bible and the Hebrew scriptures affirms that before there was all the hustle and bustle of the created world as we know it – there was God and silence.

Reading the first few verses of Genesis 1: **(pause)**

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

² Now the earth was ^[a] formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. (Pause)

All four of the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John affirm that Jesus often went out alone to pray: we can assume that he both spoke with God and listened in silence.

Reading from the Mark 1, selected verses: **(pause)**

³⁵Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. ³⁶Simon and his companions went to look for him, ³⁷and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

³⁸Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." ³⁹So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. (Pause)

Paul points out in one of his letters that the ultimate goal of a prayer centered life – is to pray without ceasing. This has something to do with listening to God all of the time, being grounded in God while we go about the business of our daily life. Reading from 1 Thessalonians 5, selected verses: **(pause)**

¹⁶Be joyful always; ¹⁷pray continually; ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (Pause)

We will end this time of hearing God's word proclaimed through scripture by affirming our faith through the words of the New Creed – please turn to page 918 in your hymn book: **(wait for people to find the reference)**

We will say the words together:

We are not alone,

we live in God's world.

We believe in God:

who has created and is creating,

who has come in Jesus,

the Word made flesh,

to reconcile and make new,

who works in us and others

by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:

to celebrate God's presence,

to live with respect in Creation,

to love and serve others,

to seek justice and resist evil,

to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,

our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

God is with us. We are not alone.

Thanks be to God.

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If you were not here last week – let me catch you up on where we are going with preaching and teaching for the month of July...

We're exploring prayer...in its many and varied formats...getting our feet wet...

Last week we started with the Lord's Prayer – the prayer Jesus taught his disciples

And amongst other things I suggested that what the disciples were asking for from Jesus when he gave them the Lord's Prayer...

Was not for him to teach them how to pray – for they would have known something of that from their religious upbringing...

But rather they were seeking new "words" for prayer that would help them to understand what it would mean to be Jesus' disciples and so to transform them into this radical re-freshment of Judaism that Jesus was bringing....

When you pray the Lord's Prayer – notice its words and content – it is the farthest thing away from what we often understand prayer in its primitive corrupt Western form...

Hey God it's you and me and this is what I need – now!

Ended referring people to the sheet handed out to them as they came into worship – with the invitation to pray the Lord's Prayer – slowly

Like you would eat a good meal – not the way we normally do it – to get through it

And to listen to what they heard...

My goal – is for you to leave this time with some things you've tried and incorporated into your prayer life – so this is not just about theory – its about practice...

I hope to give some suggestions, point you in some directions, encourage your own further exploration and practice...because there is no one way fits all people way to pray...

The rich life of "prayer" – is like a grand smorgasbord meal – God gives you the plate and says here's the feast...your relationship with me is the goal...

Pick and choose from that plate those items which will help you and I connect in your life based on who you are...

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Let's start with listening...listening is not easy...neither is listening in silence...

Most of us will naturally move more towards talking...activity...business...

You will know – as I do that temptation in a conversation...

You are talking with someone – they are saying something, sharing a story, making a point...

You are not even listening...you are focused on what you want to say next, your story, opinion on what they've said

...you inner voices are busy talking...and formulating your response...that you hardly hear what they are saying...

And so focused that you might likely interrupt to make your point...

To really be listened to....rare experience in life....

Ironically – our focus on talking so much may actually come from not having anyone ever really listen to us...

Really listening in silence does not come easily – Counselors of all ilks have to learn this...

– I went through this – I went through this in pastoral counseling training – where trainee counselors do exercises consisting of having practice counseling session's video taped and played back to you or – do exercises where you have to write down word for word what the other person said and what you said...

And then it is basically "taken apart" by the instructor who says why you say this and that and what was your timing and did you notice you when you said this you cut off this strain of conversation...

It painful...and

It is humbling – and re-enforces that listening in silence does not come naturally to human beings...

And listening is made more challenging in our "noisy" society...I heard on a CBC program last week – don't know the reference that the noise of vehicles in our modern world is actually more harmful for humans than the emissions from their engines...

We are a society that wants to be "connected" all the time to activity, stimulation and noise...

We have become accustomed to life, its noise and activity 24 and 7 - available and in contact with the world...so much so that one author suggested

Our culture is affected by a kind of collective attention deficit disorder, a state of agitation fostered by a relentless media bombardment, and by the ceaseless chatter facilitated by cell phones and the internet. Silence, sacred or otherwise has become...hard to find" (R. F Repohl)

And "noise" has something of a personnel taste quality to it – what is noise to one person is music to another person's soul...

Research is suggesting: (Washington Post – June 5, 2007 – Rick Weiss – Noise Pollution takes a toll on health and happiness)

Unwanted noise is affecting:

- Interrupting our sleep
- Interfering with our children's learning by affecting concentration
- Suppressing our immune systems

- Leaves people with increased levels of fatigue and irritability
- And increasing the risks to our health – increased heart attacks
- And reducing our inclination to help one another...

Increased noise means increased levels of the “stress Hormones” released in our bodies which literally corrode the body, eating away at blood vessels and other organs...

And our attitude towards the “noise” of our society reflects a lack of really understanding how it is affecting us:

And so we say - well, we just have to get used to – but we don’t say – well you have ecoli bacteria in your water and you just have to get used to it

And because silence can also be uncomfortable – we often try to fill it with activity...it all of a sudden it’s silent...we think something is wrong so put on the music or the TV....

And just a couple of qualifiers – as we are attempting to define silence....

- And silence can be scary and sometimes people can have too much silence...this would be more the silence that comes from absence or loss...
- So the silence someone feels when their partner, mate, child has died or they find themselves cut off and alone...this is the silence that comes from the absence of love...
- So we are not speaking of people needing more oppressive silence

But rather this silence we enter into intentionally so that we might be more aware of our relationship with God...it is to not feel more alone or withdrawn – but rather to encounter God more fully...

And I want to say that we have to also be realistic when speaking of prayer as a practice or discipline about such things in our lives as mental illness and not set each other up for failure...

In the first 40 years of my life – before I was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder...I found meditation, contemplation – very difficult and though I took spiritual directors training and considered myself to be a competent pastoral counselor and listener ...long periods of silence was something I could not do and I often felt like I was failing...and so our lives will have rhythms and seasons...I am still not a “long” silent prayer person but I do better with it – in small doses each day and find it very meaningful as opposed to years ago when it was quite frustrating....

In the centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus – after the period of persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire ended around the time that the Roman Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity and the Empire along with it...

The image of “martyr” to understand the life of a Christian was replaced by that of the “monk” and

What author called architecture of prayer” was developed within the church between the 3rd and 6th centuries – originating often in monastic or desert communities...

And it was a rich tradition with much depth and many practices...

Silence in its many prayer forms was part of that...

But during the Protestant Reformation – the emerging Protestant Church in almost all of its forms – with the exception of the Quakers (known for the predominance of silence in their worship) – developed worship styles which emphasized the bible, sermons, vocal prayer and the singing of hymns...

Verbal expressions of faith – downplaying silence and contemplative prayer...and so for many centuries – contemplation and silence was practiced more so in the Catholic tradition and on the margins of larger church life -

Only recently been re-discovered as part of our Christian tradition in the protestant world....

We tend in protestant worship to see silence as – something is wrong, some one is supposed to do something, not productive

Prayer begins with listening...St John of the Cross calls silence the first language of God...

We are talking about silence...sometimes we call it meditation or contemplation...

And again...like there is no one right way to “pray” – and there is not one clear path for everyone to walk...in prayer...so it is with language...

To attempt to describe what we seek – can’t be limited to a particular phrase or term that has to be right for everyone...

It has various terms and you will be glad to know that just as theologians, religious types and spiritual scholars debate theology and ethical issues – they also debate prayer and there are different schools and thoughts and sometimes they are in opposition to each other...

-Hard work, lived into, takes practice and not done overnight...

Father John Jillions:

“We need determination and patient endurance to build a dam to keep back the noise waters of daily demands rushing at us and trying to convince us that they are good and worthy and pressing and required as many of them are, and need our attention right away. It is just this sort of anxious noisy pressure that is the enemy of the spiritual life.”

What better could we do at this point that try it?

A very simple exercise: in silence....bring you into silence and gently bring you out...don’t worry about the time or how it will happen...

Take everything out of your hands...place your hands palms up on your knees

Settle in and gently shake your self out

Take a few turns of the neck

Be aware of any discomfort in your sitting – and see if you can adjust it

Take a some deep breaths on your own time – in hale, exhale

Do that for a couple of minutes – as you exhale – let go of what stresses or concerns are on your mind...

As soon as get silence – we often begin to think – what we have to do, what's on our minds, what feelings we have, emotions, thoughts, images...

Let them go – don't fight them

Do that for a few moments...

Still within your rhythm:

On the inhale – silently – be still

On the exhale – and know that I am God...

On the inhale – be still

On the exhale – and know that I am God...

For a few minutes...

To gently come out of that rhythm

Cease repeating the words

Continue to breath – and slowly move back into this space...

Two Closing Thoughts:

Our goal is this strange phrase that Paul uses – “to pray and praise” without ceasing...

And that does not mean to walk around all of the time like a babbling fool:

What it means for me is that: “Prayer” in its broadest sense – as an attitude and a set of wide practices – becomes so woven into our lives...

That it is always happening even when we are not aware of it or are in situations where we think we cannot pray or feel far from God...

Imagine it's like weaving – one strand is you – the other is God – the practice of prayer is the loom

Two distinct strands – woven so tightly together that they become seamless...

Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams – expresses it this way – “The end of the life of Grace is to find God in every experience and activity to be “everywhere at home” This never failing awareness of God’s presence is the deepest longing of the human heart.

That’s the goal – I can’t give you a better definition because in a way it is indefinable – only to be experienced...

And lastly – take this assurance with you...there is no such thing as failing at prayer – I will say it again – there is no such thing as failing at prayer

“Succeeding” at prayer – is not about God loving us and giving us a passing mark so that we can advance to the next grade of being a Christian...

It is not about succeeding or failing – so much of life is like that...

To utter a word in prayer – to take a moment of silence to hear God – to breathe and out – be still and know that I am God...

That’s a step – that’s victory – that’s a prayer

Even to intend to pray – is movement...

And such long journey’s of thousands of steps – because in prayer we never really arrive – it is a life long practice

Begin with the first step....

Barbara Brown Taylor – 180 – An Altar in the World

“It is even fine with them (monks she knew) for me to think I am failure at prayer as long as I go on nudging at God’s breast, letting the smell of that sweet milk lead me deeper into the ordinary activities of my everyday life.”

Romans 8:26-27

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. ²⁷And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.

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**Some Help to incorporate silence into your Prayer Life
(From various sources)**

JESUS ON SILENT PRAYER: (from “The Prayer of Silence)

Jesus often prayed alone – (Luke 5:16, Mark 1:35, Luke 6:12, Mark 6:46)

Jesus taught an intensely private and unassertive view of prayer – (Matthew 6:5-6)
Jesus experienced the indwelling presence of God – (John 14:10, John 5:19-20)
Jesus proposed the same experience of God’s indwelling presence to each of his disciples and therefore us. (John 14:19-21, 24)

“Prayer is not just a formula of words, or a series of desires springing up in the heart – it is the orientation of our whole body, mind and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration. All good meditative prayer is a conversion of our entire self to God.” (Thomas Merton)

“Continual silence, and removal from the noise of the things of this world and forgetfulness of them, lifts the heart and asks us to think of the things of heaven and sets our heart upon them.” (St Bernard of Clairiveux)

SOME SUGGESTIONS:

- Find a place – perhaps away from your normal environment – or free of distractions – outside or inside - backyard, a park, a quiet room in the home – turn off any sounds and distractions TV, computer, cell phone radio etc...
- use some relaxation or quieting techniques – deep breathing
- pay some attention to posture – an easy chair might be too comfortable and sitting cross legged on the floor might be too painful – a good compromise could be to sit in a comfortable chair – upright and with your back straight – feet flat on the floor, thighs parallel to the floor, hands relaxed palms facing up – trying cupping one over the other – left hand underneath, right hand on top, with thumbs lightly touching, eyes either closed or half open, as much as your body relaxed as possible, breathing through your nose
- you can use ear plugs if your area is noisy...each of us has physical limitations based on who we are, our health age etc...with who you are being as comfortable in the above suggested middle ground is what you are aiming for...
- Invite God intentionally to be apart of this time of silence...
- use an easily repeated phrase, name of God, a biblical line - Be still and know that I am God, Gracious God, God, hear my prayer, breathe on me breathe of God etc
- as distractions, thoughts, stresses, concerns, etc come – let them go in the exhaling of your breaths – let whatever is inside be and let go of what you can i.e. future worries, things you need to do etc
- Remember that in every act of prayer God is present and in communion – don’t necessarily look for any results, things you should do etc...just be!
- do this as long as is comfortable for you
- don’t worry or feel quilt if you fall asleep – perhaps that’s really what you needed to do
- afterwards – you could write down any thoughts, images, feelings that come to mind in a journal if you wished to
- begin with small periods – once or twice a day – work into what is comfortable for you