

Simply Silence
Luke 8: 26-39
1 Kings 19: 1-4 and 11-15a

No doubt you have noticed, as I have, this year's crop of signs advertising summer camps. Most of them are those inexpensive, corrugated plastic rectangles on spindly wire legs. New ones appear overnight, it seems, especially at major intersections, like Route 206 and Pottersville Road, and down by the train station.

The offerings are getting more inventive every day: playwriting camp, keyboard ensemble camp, skateboard camp, and - my favorite - brain camp, or as the sign actually says: "Avoid Summer Learning Loss."

Now I do realize that for the family with two working parents, what to do with school-age children in the summertime can be a real problem, and organized camps and recreation programs are a necessity. And yet there is another motivation here, too, and that is the drive to keep busy, to keep moving, to plan for and organize every hour of every day so as not to lose ground, not to fall behind. It's a corollary, I think, of constantly talking on a cell phone, texting, twittering, blogging, emailing or being plugged into an iPod.

Once again, we make the observation that we cannot stand being alone. We cannot cope with quiet. We don't know what to do with silence. And yet, that is exactly where God is waiting to communicate with us - in the empty spaces - when we dare to take some time away from the busyness - the chaos, if you will - of our lives.

We've just heard two Bible stories that make the point.

In the strange and dramatic story from Luke's Gospel, Jesus is out in Gentile territory, an alien place. He is met by a madman, a demon-possessed madman, a man whose life was in utter chaos, who had been driven by his demons into solitary places but certainly not quiet places. That is where Jesus meets him.

In today's world we would understand that this man probably was suffering from some emotional or mental affliction, depression perhaps, or anxiety or obsessive-compulsive disorder. Today we would treat such a condition with medication or counseling. But in Jesus' day, people understood such disorders to be caused by demons and evil spirits who took possession of the mind and soul. The treatment was exorcism and so that is what Jesus did.

The story has served over the ages to affirm Jesus' power over such demonic spirits and to underscore his compassion for those who suffer. *...the people went out to see what had happened. When they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting at Jesus' feet, dressed and in his right mind.* Jesus brought silence; he restored wholeness and calm. And he gave him back meaning and purpose for his life. *Return to your home, Jesus told him, and declare how much God has done for you.*

How many families these days are at their wits' end trying valiantly to deal with and care for a mentally ill loved one, an elderly wife with Alzheimer's, an alcoholic brother, an abusive husband, a depressed and addicted daughter? And for all the medication, hospitalization, counseling and group therapy, is it not prayer that brings hope and assurance? Is it not the Holy Spirit that fills the empty space with love? Is it not the silent presence of Jesus that quiets the mind?

This week's story about Elijah is rooted in violent chaos as well: Jezebel's wild threats against God's prophets and the actual murders; Elijah's own killing of the 450 prophets of Baal; Elijah's fears for his life and his escape into the wilderness, where he just wants to give up and die. God promises to come to him, though, and directs him to a mountain. But only more *sturm und drang* occurs: a great wind, and after the wind, an earthquake, and after the earthquake, fire. But God was not in the wind or the quake or the fire.

And then...*a sound of sheer silence*. And then...the voice of the Lord: "*What are you doing here, Elijah?*"

And that is the question which only silence can allow us to ask...and dare us to ask. Only silence can give us the empty space to listen for the answer, to listen for the voice of God – the healing and comforting voice, the challenging voice, the creative voice.

What are we doing here? It is a simple and profound question to ask

- when you have been pushed to the brink by internal noise, confusion and anxiety...
- when you are over-committed, over-scheduled and over-programmed, trapped...
- when you feel that whatever you do, it is never enough...
- when your senses shut down so that you can't hear birds chirping or the wind rustling the leaves...
- when it gets dark but you haven't noticed the sun set...
- when you can no longer imagine pictures in the clouds...

Periods of silence are moments of Sabbath rest, when we are free to contemplate and meditate upon that question, What am I doing here? And maybe to re-evaluate where we direct our attention and how we spend our time day to day.

We have had the great joy this morning of baptizing Jude Thomson Meadows, a beautiful infant, full of promise and hope and love. As we celebrated this sacrament, gently pouring water over his little head, we were reminded of the significance of water itself - how it refreshes, restores, cleanses and sustains us. We were reminded that Jesus Christ is living water. Silence is like the gentle water of baptism – refreshing, restoring, cleansing and sustaining us in a crazy, busy world.

At every baptism, we each are called to remember our own baptisms, called to remember who you are in this world. It is like hearing the voice of God in silences, asking, “What are you doing here?”

And in response, you may say: I am here to be your child, God. You have claimed my life, freed me from sin and death, and joined me to Christ’s ministry of love, peace and justice.

And no matter how I choose to spend my time, no matter whom I meet, where I live, what happens to me, I am God’s child. In silences – restorative, refreshing, necessary silences - this I can rediscover, and it makes all the difference in the world.

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