

Sermon – February 16, 2020

Reflections from the heart: The Sound of Silence

Mark 7: 31-37

Like some of you here, I grew up with the songs of Simon and Garfunkel. Some of my favourite songs they wrote and performed include: Bridge Over Troubled Water, April Come She Will, Flowers Never Bend in the Rainfall, Homeward Bound and of course The Sound of Silence. It's hard to believe that The Sound of Silence was released 56 years ago in 1964 and it's still popular today. It was written by Paul Simon when he was 21 years old right after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The song was so successful that it was used for many films such as the Graduate, Trolls and Vietnam War. Numerous cover versions of the song became popular but the most famous one was the rendition of the song in 2015 by an American heavy metal band called Disturbed.

Like timeless novels, there's a classic storytelling through song lyrics. Simon & Garfunkel's *Sound of Silence* is a perfect example of timeless lyrics. They remain in peoples' minds because the message universally resonates, no matter who sings them. But what does the song mean? Why was it written? It's not completely clear but Paul Simon has previously said that it was about how he wrote songs. He would go into his bathroom, turn out the lights and sit there by himself in complete darkness and silence. And in those situations, the words and the music would come to him. Art Garfunkel reflected on the words of the song and summed up the song's meaning as "the inability of people to communicate with each other... especially emotionally, so what you see around you are people unable to love each other."

Admit it, we live in a world filled with noise: the hum of electronic devices, the incessant sounds of ring tones from mobile phones, music blaring from earphones and CD players, the constant chatter of televisions, radios and humans. Ours is not a society that places a high premium on silence. Given the constant noise that characterizes our culture, it is difficult to believe that there are people who still value the virtue of silence as part of their way of life. Many of the older religious orders did just that, even before the explosion of sound that modern technology has made possible. Whether it's the Desert Fathers, who staked out their place in the wilderness to

wrestle with the secular society, or orders like the Benedictines, who sought more isolated settings in which they could live the quiet common life, these religious orders can sometimes give the impression that the only way to find silence is to retreat to remote locations.

“There are many fine things which we cannot say if we have to shout,” Henry David Thoreau observed in contemplating how silence ennobles speech. A year earlier, he had written in his journal: “I wish to hear the silence of the night, for the silence is something positive and to be heard.” Thoreau’s observation is a sentiment as we find ourselves immersed in a culture that increasingly mistakes loudness for authority, voice projection for attention or screaming to be heard.

Silence can be a blessing and a curse. In silence some of the world’s greatest discoveries have been made. Archimedes discovered the law of specific gravity while relaxing in silence in his bath. Galileo discovered the principle of the pendulum while praying silently in the cathedral of Pisa. Monks pray to God in silence. The prophet Elijah found God’s voice in the stillness. Jesus too went out to a deserted place to pray. And the Psalmist’s voice rings in our ears: “Be still, and know that I am God.” But if we remain silent all the time, we ran the risk of letting the tyrants of the world get on with their agenda. The song alludes to extreme capitalism and consumerism that is suffocating the society. The song also conveys a powerful warning against the dangers of individualism, indifference and loneliness. It tells us not to stay quiet if we have to and we should not be afraid of speaking out, both in our personal and our social life. To speak out is essential in drawing attention to our needs and to demand justice and dignity for all.

Today is Black History Month, a time set aside to celebrate important people and events in the history of the African descent people. This history doesn’t generally receive much attention which is why a month is set aside by many countries across the world. The challenge in this effort is that there are many things to honour and celebrate, but the overall story of those of African heritage is not a happy one. In fact, the story has been one of struggle after struggle after struggle. The Sound of Silence speaks to me on the issue of racism, particularly how we treat the black community. Admit it or not, the issue on racism is widespread – has always been present in almost all sectors in our society including the church. Racism is present in both explicit terms, as verbal

and physical abuse, but also in less explicit ways, more hidden, covert and unconscious. Racism is both a personal and a communal sin, a wound that seems unable to be healed. There are people who will choose to remain quiet on the subject because they do not want to be troubled by it. These are the people according to Paul Simon, who are *talking without speaking, hearing without listening* and are not willing to detach themselves from what is mundane or superficial. People simply live in the world as it is without challenging the personal and communal evils that silence the voices of justice, freedom and love.

What is the sound of silence in today's gospel reading? You see, the deaf and mute man was silent for all his life until Jesus came to his rescue. He was a foreigner too, which makes him doubly afflicted. Due to his condition as deaf and mute, he was isolated and marginalized., which means he was cut off from communication on both ends. He could not hear, and so people would have difficulty communicating with him. And he could hardly talk, which means he would have a hard time communicating back. He would not have had the many advantages that deaf people have in our own day, and so this man would have been extremely isolated and lonely. When Jesus told him, *ephpatha*, an Aramaic word which means open up, Jesus was giving the man the opportunity to hear and speak up. No longer he could be silent for the rest of his life. Jesus welcomes him back to the fold of community and human life. Theologian Debie Thomas says that Jesus commanded the man to be opened just as Jesus was telling us to do the same. *“Be opened to the truth that God isn't done with you yet. Be opened to the destabilizing wisdom of people who are nothing like you. Be opened to the voice of God speaking from places you consider unholy. Be opened to the widening of the table. Be opened to Good News that stretches your capacity to love. Be opened.”*

Friends, it's time we break the sound of silence. It's time we open up! It's time we wake up and pay attention. It's time we speak up and let the powers that be hear our voice! Let us in our prayers say, “Jesus, I hear your words, ‘Be open!’ Unblock my ears that I may listen to your word. Open the door of my heart that I may grow in sensitivity to the suffering of others. Liberate my tongue so that I may speak in gratitude of your loving kindness.” Thanks be to God. Amen.