

Good Friday, April 14, 2006
Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Mieke Vandersall
Mark 14:32-15:47

In the end, we are given silence. The twelve gathered together and they broke bread together and Jesus spoke to them. "One of you will betray me." And despite that knowledge, he gave them the ultimate gift of himself. And having given the gifts, he asked them a simple favor, sit with him, awake, when he prayed. And he prayed for this moment, this moment here today on Friday to pass from him. He sobbed and grieved all of the walks untaken, all of the words unspoken, all of the potential unfulfilled. But maybe it was the silence of the night that put them to sleep. And Judas came and was the leader of the betrayers, and they lay hands on him and they arrested him. And he was tried in front of the elders and they found no real guilt, only the guilt of his challenge to Caesar and to the state that he was the Messiah, which he was the One sent by God. He was the One who had been sent to show us how to live, and die, differently. And then we tried him and we prodded him and we spit on him and we asked him to prove himself. And all he gave was silence. No Seven last words like the author of John insisted on, just one simple word here, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And then a loud cry and he breathed his last. Silence.

So much silence in Mark's gospel, compared to the other accounts, not very much to comfort us. No promise to the criminals on either side that they would be with him in paradise, no promise to his disciples and his mother, no plea for us to be forgiven, for we know not what we do. The most human of all the words we are given, "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?," and in these few words we are given permission to cry out in frustration the unfairness of life and death, and then a loud shout, a plea, and silence.

There are those times when all has been said. Teaching after teaching, parable after parable, explanation after explanation. And there was nothing else to be said. Jesus had said it all, he had taught it all to us, how to live and how to die. After quarreling with your beloved for too long, with the end frightfully in sight, all has been said and the silence is the most unsettling of all. Watching coverage day in and day out of towers tumbling on September 11, commentary after commentary, image after image. And the more talk there was the less there needed to be, because it was all said, and no words could change it, no words could comfort. Prayer after prayer, begging your God to remove the grief, the sadness, the confusion, the anxiety, the depression, and the only thing you receive is silence. Too much silence. All alone with the tragic realization that alone is all you are, no matter what we add to our lives, our work, our activities, our lovers, our friends, alone and silent, you and God, nothing else, no one else can save you from yourself.

And then there are times that we wish for silence. A woman on the train last night grabbed, pinched the arm of her son, no more than 10 years old, thrusting him down on the seat, cursing at him, how bad he is. You know, one of those mother grasps on his arm that will leave fingerprints forever, and leaves the rest of us wondering what in the world he did so badly to be told that he should have never been born. And her other two children, slapping their legs, telling them to sit, that if she was any other mother she would have beat them, they are lucky. And I sat wanting Jesus to pick them up, hold them close, wondering where he was, wanting him to whisper in their ears "The angels were singing when you were born," wanting to tell them that nothing in life nor in death could separate them from the love of God." Wanting Jesus to hold the woman close and just be silent with her, let her cry all her sorrows and her fears and frustrations and disappointments on his shoulder."

And the moments that silence is Golden. The musical moments, the split seconds between phrases when the silence, the rest is a welcome change, a respite, that makes what comes before and what comes after more profound. The rests, the silence, the hardest times in musical life to acknowledge, there is too often the temptation to skip them, to move on to the next. It is the hardest to sit, not knowing how the notes will flow from your voice, from your instrument. They are the most precious notes, the silent ones.

Standing on the beach with a sunset before your eyes, the reds and the purples and the blues mixing together and the big burning ball falling away behind the sea. Knowing you are in a place that is sacred and holy and no words are possible, they aren't even welcomed, they ruin the moment of recognition that the

world goes on, that God bids us to sleep as we allow God to create a newness as the Sun rises again the next morning.

Silence, I believe, is the hardest. When there is nothing else to say, when it has all been said, when you can't find the words, when the magic of the moment that the great realization comes that you are alone in your silence, that you cannot control the world around you, that you can't make people come back, that you can't make a new job appear, that you are essentially so exposed to God, regardless of what you place between yourself and others, yourself and God, you are naked and intimately known by the One that created you with beauty and magic in your mother's womb, that you can't control your end moments. These are the hardest.

And they all stood by the cross knowing, but yet wondering, where are you going, my Lord, why not prove yourself one last time, show us who you are, come down from that cross and prove to us, one last time that you are the Messiah. If you are the Messiah, control your end moments, if you are the Messiah, give us some more words, if you are the Messiah, teach to us one last time.

Fredrick Buechner writes, "Three years ago, not long after my only brother, Jamie, died, I found myself one summer afternoon missing him so much, needing him so much, that I decided to call his empty New York apartment. I knew perfectly well there wasn't anybody there to answer and yet of course I couldn't know it for sure because nothing, nothing is for sure in this world, and who could say that at least some echo of him mightn't be there, and I would hear him again, hear the sound of his voice again, the sound of his marvelous laugh. So I sat there in the Vermont sunshine—this skeptical old believer, this believing old skeptic, who you would have thought had better sense—and let the phone ring, let it ring, let it ring.

Did Jamie answer it? How wonderful to be able to say that by some miracle he did and that I heard his voice again, but of course he didn't, he didn't, he didn't, and all I heard was the silence of his absence. Yet who knows? Who can ever know anything for sure about the mystery of things? "In my Father's house are many rooms," Jesus said, and I would bet my bottom dollar that in one of those many rooms that phone rang and rang true and was heard. I believe that in some sense my brother's voice was in the ringing itself and that Jesus' voice was in it too.¹

And so it is, our voices are in the silence, the silence forced upon us, the silence wished for. In the tragedy of this day, this day when Jesus gave his life for us so that we may have life, this day when Jesus gave his death for us so that we may learn how to die. In the silence of the excruciating loss of this day when we learn how painful it really is to let go, when we experience how scary it is to let die, for we don't know when or how resurrection will come again. In this silence our quiet voices are heard, our screams, our begging for help, our insistence on controlling our own fate, and desire to know how it is going to turn out. In this silence our last screams, our petition, "Why God are you forsaking me? Where are you God?" they are all heard.

Jesus told us everything we need to know. He taught us all the lessons for life. And in his silent end our voices ring and his voice rings and we are given promise and hope in this silence, for it is in silence that we are given the sacred.

AMEN.

¹ Fredrick Buechner, From "At the Last Supper: Bidding Farewell," *The Christian Century*, April 4, 2006.