

# THE SOUND OF SILENCE

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**MARK 14:60-62; JAMES 3:17-18; PSALM 46:1-3; 10-11**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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**AUGUST 30, 2015/14<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**

We've come to the end of our summer series, "Walking in the footsteps of a subversive Saviour."

For a good chunk of the last two months we've been paying attention to the things that Jesus *does* throughout the gospels.

Actions speak louder than words, the saying goes. Or at least as loud as words.

I've shared this quote from a friend of mine before, but it perhaps bears repeating:

"Don't tell me what you believe. Let me follow you around for a week or so and watch what you *do*. Then *I'll* tell *you* what you believe."

I don't imagine this is a challenge many of us are eager to take up any time soon. 😊

Jesus, however, is another matter.

Jesus' actions exhibit a deep congruence with the things he says. Unlike us, there is no gap between word and deed for him. Indeed, Jesus' deeds were at least as provocative and unsettling as his words!

We've seen this throughout the summer.

Today, we end on what might just be the most challenging of the bunch.

**Staying Silent**— When others would seek an opportunity to speak, Jesus is *silent*.

So, in keeping with today's theme, I thought it would be appropriate to spend the next fifteen minutes in silence.

Set your watches. Ready? Go! 😊

Ok, maybe not.

At the outset, I should say something about the title of the sermon. I chose the title not as a clever reference to Simon & Garfunkel's 1964 hit song (although I like the song), but because I want to look at the sound that *Jesus' silence, specifically* makes.

At the risk of stating the obvious, Jesus wasn't *always* silent. He doesn't even remain silent for the three short verses of our gospel passage today!

There were times when Jesus said what needed to be said. Many times.

Jesus was a teacher, after all, a *rabbi*. He preached sermons and taught his disciples. He spoke to people in marketplaces and as they were walking down the road.

Jesus had (and *has!*) things to say. *Important* things.

**So, the interesting question becomes, *when* was Jesus silent?** In what circumstances did he respond in this way?

And once we have some ideas about this, we can move on to the next question: When might silence be the response that God is calling us to, whether as individuals or as a church?

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Let's set the scene from Mark 14. We are near the end of Mark's gospel.

Jesus has been anointed with expensive perfume (for burial). The Last Supper has come and gone. Jesus has predicted Peter's denial.

We have witnessed agonizing scenes in Gethsemane as Jesus wrestled with the path laid before him.

Jesus has been arrested.

And then, he is brought before the high priests, elders, and teachers of the law.

This is the group that Jesus has had the most conflict with throughout his ministry.

This is the group that has consistently sought to demonstrate the illegitimacy of Jesus' work.

This is the group that has consistently sought to trap him, to show that he does not respect the Jewish law (recall our story from last week, where they brought a woman caught in adultery to Jesus, hoping to catch him, forcing him to choose between stoning a woman or breaking the law).

This is the group that has consistently said, "This man is not who he says he is! He is a blasphemer! He does the works he does by the power of the devil! On and on the accusations would go...

This is the group that has resisted, at every stage, Jesus' pronouncement of the kingdom of God, his recalibration of his people's understanding of who God is and what God wants—his fulfillment and transcendence of the law, his new way of being the people of God *in* and *for* the world.

And now, here at the end, he stands before these people again.

All kinds of false and damaging and conflicting testimony has been brought before him. It is a "trial" that looks more like a circus of fools. They can't even coordinate their lies, can't even get their stories straight as they're trying to get Jesus executed!

So, after all of their anger and lies have been spent, the high priest asks Jesus, "Are you not going to answer?"

Jesus says nothing. Why?

I think that Jesus' silence is strategic. It's not that he can't think of anything to say. He *is* saying something by saying nothing.

I think his silence was a demonstration of at least two points:

**First, Jesus is silent because he knew that *at this point in the story*, words wouldn't do any good.**

Luke's version of the story makes this clear. Jesus says, in response to their questions at the trial, **"If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer."**

This could stand as a summary statement of Jesus' dealings with Israel's religious leaders!

So often, the religious leaders *refused* to believe the words Jesus said, even when confronted with miraculous signs (one thinks of the healing of the man born blind in John 9 where the leaders are more concerned about the violation of Sabbath laws than celebrating the sight of a blind man!).

And so often, these same leaders refused to answer or were unable to answer when Jesus gave them questions of his own (e.g., his questions of them about the nature of John's baptism in Matthew 21, when they ask him where his authority comes from).

Jesus knows that there is nothing left to say.

There is nothing he can say that he hasn't already said, nothing he can do that he has not already done to convince those whose hearts are hard, those who are determined to prioritize law over love, those for whom religion is more about themselves and maintaining social control than it is about worshiping and following the living God.

**Second, I think Jesus remains silent in order to demonstrate that the religious leaders had no power over him.**

There is strength and power in refusing to play the game according to the rules dictated to you.

Jesus knows that the whole "trial" is a farce, and that violent men are going to do what violent men *always* do when their power and control is threatened. He knows that he is going to die.

He is not going to beg for his life, nor is he going to give legitimacy to the lies that have been spoken about them by trying to refute them. He is not going to play that game.

And so, he remains silent. He knows that all human power is limited and temporary, and that his death is the means through which God will accomplish his purposes in the world.

He trusts in a power that is far superior to kangaroo courts and insecure men.

1 Peter 2:22-23 puts it this way:

“He committed no sin,  
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. **Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.**

Well, eventually Jesus’ silence gets to the high priest. Finally, he get gets blunt:

“Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”

Now Jesus opens his mouth.

“I am,” he says.

**I am**, echoing the great name YHWH himself used out of the burning bush. *I am who I am.*

And then, referencing Daniel 7:13, Jesus says, “You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One...”

It is a reference to a prophetic vision of the sovereignty of God over all things, of an “everlasting dominion that will never pass away,” and of the Son of Man ruling and reigning over all nations and peoples.

When Jesus finally does speak in his defense to Israel’s gatekeepers, this is what he says: You can mock and ridicule me, you can lie about me, you can misrepresent and underestimate me...

You can even kill me.

But nothing *you* can do will separate me from my relationship with the Father and the purposes that he has for the world.

You don't have that kind of power.

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So what do we learn from all this? On the one hand, this scene from Mark is utterly unique in all of history. Not many of us will find ourselves in religious and political tribunals with trumped up charges against us.

What can Jesus' actions in this remarkable scene teach us about how we go about our less remarkable days?

Well, for starters, I think we learn something about how to respond to accusation.

Sometimes *not* saying something is the most effective way to say something very important.

We live in times where we are eager to defend ourselves from real or imagined accusations, from the slightest grievance.

I will speak personally, if somewhat trivially.

Many of you know that I have had a blog for nearly a decade now, and my blog is an area where, on very *rare* occasions, theological disagreements take place. 😊

My inclination is to respond to *every* comment that is made, to correct *every* inaccurate assumption made about my writing, to even fire the occasional sarcastic missive when someone stubbornly refuses to be won over by my incisive logic and persuasive rhetoric. 😊

This was particularly true in the earlier years of my blog when I would stay up late into the night bravely hammering away on my keyboard in the service of truth!

But occasionally, Naomi would ask me annoying questions like, "Why do you *need* to be right? Why do you need to be *seen* to be right?"

Why, indeed?

In this relatively trivial example, I had a strong need to be *vindicated*. To be publicly acknowledged as *correct*.

This week, I came across a passage from a book called “Sirach” (or sometimes, “Ecclesiasticus”). This is one of the books of the Apocrypha, a set of writings found in the Scriptures used by Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox churches.

It is a book of wisdom written by a man named Joshua Ben Sira, a Jewish teacher who wrote about two hundred years before Christ.

Here’s what he says at one point:

Be brief; say much in few words;  
**be as one who knows and can still hold his tongue.**  
— Sirach 32:7-9

**Be as one who knows and can still hold his tongue?!**

Is that even possible?!

A word for bloggers (and preachers?) everywhere, perhaps? ☺

This is so hard to do, isn’t it? If we *know*, our tongues often go into overdrive! We can’t *know* and not say. We can’t be *right* and not let others know. We can’t be *innocent* and stay silent.

I want to read our second passage again:

**17** But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, **willing to yield**, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

How often are we *willing to yield*? Even when we’re convinced we’re right? Even when we *know* we are right?

How often are we willing to do this in our relationships with our kids? Our marriages?

How often are we willing to do this when there is conflict in the church?

Jesus didn’t need to justify himself. But so often, it seems that we do.

**We have a very difficult time entrusting ourselves to the one who judges justly.**

This is especially true for us when, *unlike Jesus*, we're doing things in our life that can't be justified. Our defenses and vindications tend to get a bit louder and more insistent when we are trying to justify bad behaviour!

We live in a culture that is fond of speaking about our "rights," as citizens, as human beings. And there is a sense in which this is very good and appropriate, particularly when we are speaking about vulnerable people who are being abused and mistreated.

But as Tim Otto reminds us in his book, *Oriented to Faith*,

**Christians ought to think carefully about rights language, because at the heart of our faith, we see Christ choosing to give up his rights.**<sup>1</sup>

I am not suggesting that as Christians we ought never to stand up for ourselves or the rights of others, or that we shouldn't go to great lengths to speak and act for truth.

But, like Jesus, we must pick our spots. Not every "right" needs to be defended. Not every accusation needs to be answered.

Sometimes, there is great power and wisdom in remaining silent.

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Earlier, I quoted 1 Peter 2 about Jesus entrusting himself to the one who judges justly.

I read verse 23. I want to read the larger passage this verse is found in:

**21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.**

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"He committed no sin,  
and no deceit was found in his mouth."

23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Otto, *Oriented to Faith: Transforming the Conflict Over Gay Relationships* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 72.



To this *we* are called.

How?

How can we follow Jesus down this difficult road of yielding, of not needing to be right, of not needing to be vindicated, of entrusting ourselves to the one who judges justly?

I want to close with a simple reminder of one of the most basic truths in all of Scripture, one of the most basic truths that we will ever internalize.

*Be still and know that I am God*, says the psalmist.

Jesus firmly believed that a sovereign God could be entrusted with ultimate responsibility for the outcome of human history—that his fate was not, ultimately, in the hands of those who claimed this power, but in the hands of God alone.

Do we share this conviction? Can we trust God enough to be silent? To not need to be heard, to be right, to be admired and respected, to be vindicated?

Can we *trust* God, even though the “mountains should shake in the heart of the sea?”

Can we, like Jesus, be still and know that God is God?

I think we can.

And I think we *must*, because the world needs to see a better way than the noisy, self-righteous, clamouring to be heard and justified and vindicated that dominates *so* much social discourse, inside and outside of the church.

May God help us, as we seek to measure our words carefully.

May God give us the courage to be silent, and the wisdom to know how and when to embrace the silence that speaks louder than words.

Amen.



